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THE BELT

COMPLETE: BOOKS 1-6

OUT IN THE ASTEROID BELT
YOU'RE NEVER FAR FROM A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE

GERALD M. KILBY

THE BELT - COMPLETE SERIES

BOOKS 1 - 6

GERALD M. KILBY



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BOOK 1: ENTANGLEMENT

ANTIOPE NINE ZERO

"Wake up, Commander. We have a situation."

Somewhere in the inner recesses of Commander Scott McNabb's slumbering subconscious, a series of synapses fired to alert his higher mind to incoming data. A voice... calling to him... one he knew... then it clicked. It was the ship's AI, Aria.

"Go away," was the most Scott was willing to utter by way of a reply.

"I'm sorry to wake you, Commander, but we have a situation that requires your attention."

Scott gave a low groan. "Is the ship compromised?"

"No, nothing that serious. The ship is fine. But..."

"Are we in any danger?"

"No, Commander. No danger. However..."

"Well then, just go away and let me get back to sleep." Scott buried his head further into the pillow.

"Commander, if I may..."

"Oh, for God's sake, Aria. You're the brains around here, you run the ship, what do you need me for?" There was a momentary pause, and Scott thought he heard the AI give an exasperated sigh, which was ridiculous; he must be dreaming it.

"I appreciate your confidence in my abilities. But a situation has arisen where protocol requires me to alert the ship's commander—that would be you."

It was Scott's turn to sigh. Aria would not leave him be until it said whatever had it all up in a heap. He excavated a hand from under the bedclothes and rubbed his face. "Okay, what is it?"

"My sensors have detected another ship close to the binary asteroid Antiope Nine Zero."

Scott scratched his head. "Another ship... this far out in the Belt?"

"Yes, Commander."

"Granted, that's unusual, Aria. But what? Is it alien or something?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Commander. The probability of an alien civilization existing that is capable of..."

"Okay, Aria... whatever." Scott waved a dismissive hand in the air. "So, what's the big deal?"

"It is a derelict spaceship, sir."

Scott raised his head from the pillow. "Derelict?"

"Yes, Commander. Derelict."

"As in dead?"

"Technically, a spaceship is not alive to begin with. But yes, there's no power signature and no signs of life. I have also tried to hail it several times. My initial analysis indicates it has been dead, as you put it, for several Earth years."

By now, Scott had rolled himself over face up on the bed. "I see."

"Protocol dictates that I must alert the commander in such a situation. We are required by the Outer Space Treaty to offer assistance to any vessel in difficulty. However, if we are to rendezvous with it, we must start deceleration as soon as possible. But you will need to give that order, Commander."

Scott sat up and scratched his chin, thinking. "So, if the ship is derelict, there would be salvage rights on it?"

"Assuming that everyone on the ship is dead, then yes."

Scott was beginning to realize that this just might be his lucky day. If they could claim salvage on this derelict ship, then the money would go a long way to solving a lot of Scott's problems—if not all of them. He stretched his arms and rubbed his face. "How long before rendezvous?"

"Approximately four hours."

"And deceleration?"

"We will need a seventy-two-minute burn."

"The crew are not going to like that, Aria."

"Indeed. However, the decision is yours and yours alone, Commander."

"Okay, Aria. Alert the rest of the crew. Tell them to strap in and prepare for deceleration. We'll meet up on the bridge after the burn. In the meantime, find out as much as you can about that vessel, particularly, eh... how much it might be worth in salvage."

"Will do, Commander. But I have found scant information on it so far."

Scott was now strapping himself into a seat in his cabin designed to mitigate the effects of the heavy gee experienced by deceleration.

"That seems a bit strange. There must be some record of a vessel going missing out here."

"There is, but it's classified."

Scott's eyes widened. "Classified?"

"Yes, Commander."

Two thoughts now ran through Scott's mind in tandem. One, classified usually implied a whole pile of trouble, at best. At worst, it could be downright dangerous. There might be a damn good reason why this ship was lost, and that meant the crew of the *Hermes* could be exposing themselves to a potentially hazardous situation. The second thought he had, however, was more interesting: if this derelict craft was indeed part of a classified mission, the bonus for salvage just shot through the roof. Scott snapped on the last of the harness. "Have the others been alerted, Aria?"

"Yes, Commander. They're all strapped in now."

"Okay. Punch it." Scott felt the ship's powerful engines kick in and he was slammed back into the seat. They would all be taking heavy gee for the next 72 minutes. Not pleasant, but it did give his mind a lot of time to consider how he was going to spend the salvage money—very pleasant indeed.

HERMES

By the time Scott arrived on the bridge of the *Hermes*, flight officer Miranda Lee was already there, standing beside the holo-table examining a gently rotating 3D display of the derelict vessel. She noticed him as he entered and looked up. "Well, if it isn't the commander of our great and glorious ship. Nice to see you on the bridge—for once."

Scott, having spent the best part of three years cooped up with this crew, had learned to ignore such jibes. But Miranda persisted, raising an arm to her chin in a mock pose of concentration. "Let me see, oh... it must be at least six months, maybe even nine?"

Again, he let it go. There was nothing to be gained by taking her on, as she could be quite intimidating when she wanted. Starting a row with her now would serve no useful purpose; it would only upset the delicate harmony that had been carved out by five people living in close proximity, far from civilization—and there were another two years to go. Instead, he smiled. "That's what happens when an AI runs the show: we all get made redundant."

"To be precise, Commander, I am a quantum intelligence—a QI, not an AI," Aria's voice resonated around the bridge.

"Yeah, whatever," said Scott, waving a hand in the air. He then nodded at the 3D rendering of the spacecraft hovering above the holo-table. "So, what do you make of it?"

Miranda leaned in on the table's edge. "Standard *Excelsior* class interplanetary transport. No torus, so no artificial gravity." She pointed to the back of the spaceship. "Looks like it had an engine upgrade to give it more thrust. It's also sustained a lot of damage just forward of the engine bay. See here." She paused the rotation of the 3D image and motioned at a spot toward the center of the vessel. But before Scott could take a closer look, both Cyrus Sanato, the ship's engineer, and Dr. Steph Rayman, the mission's medical doctor, came onto the bridge. Scott nodded a collective greeting and waved them over to the table. "Come—check this out."

"Jeez, what are the odds of finding something like this out

here?" said Cyrus, moving in closer to the holo-table.

"Approximately, one point three billion to one," replied the disembodied voice of Aria.

Strictly speaking, Cyrus wasn't looking at the image of the spacecraft in the general sense of the word. That's because the ship's engineer had lost his sight in an accident when he was just a child. But that wasn't to say he couldn't see—far from it—as he was surgically fitted with enhanced biotech that enabled Cyrus to see the world in exquisite detail. Not only that, he could visualize in spectra far beyond the capabilities of the average human eye, those of infrared and ultraviolet, and in resolutions from the micro to the macroscopic. However, this hyper-vision required him to wear a wraparound visor permanently attached to his skull, the lenses of which were a dark reflective orange polished up to a high mirror finish. This, coupled with his bald head and squat physique, gave him the appearance of a bug and could be a little disconcerting on first encounter. Nevertheless, he had a permanent happy smile, bordering on a chuckle, and a disarming charm that made people warm to him instantly, regardless of his odd demeanor.

"Is this the best detail we've got on the craft, Aria?" Cyrus seemed to be adjusting something on the side of his head as he talked.

"We are still over two hours before rendezvous. The image will resolve better as we get closer."

"It makes a change from looking at rocks all the time," said Steph, who stood close to Cyrus at the holo-table.

Considering that their mission was to do a geotechnical analysis of the central asteroid belt, they spent a lot of time looking at rocks, as Steph put it. Yet that was the job. Yes, it could be monotonous, even downright boring, but that's what they all signed up for—except, perhaps, for Scott McNabb.

For him, the offer to command this mission had been a no-brainer. The way he saw it, the job gave him the money to clear some of his family debts. He could also get as far away as possible from certain individuals who were prone to visiting in the middle of the night—along with a few friends. They were the sort that had no problem explaining Scott's fiscal obligations through the subtle employment of a few well-placed kicks to the head.

As for the others, Scott didn't really know what their motivation was, nor did he care. You would think that after three years

together they would know everything there was to know about each other, right down to their most intimate personal grooming habits. But, as a credit to the consortium that designed this mission, they were acutely aware that sticking five people together in a tin can for five years could be a recipe for disaster. It was entirely possible that one or more would go insane, or worse, become raging psychopaths. So, to protect their investment, they provided the mission crew with an exceptionally roomy—albeit very old—space station.

In many respects, it was overkill. The station was originally built to accommodate around a hundred and fifty people and had an enormous rotating torus that facilitated a very comfortable one-gravity environment. So, the five crew of the Hermes Asteroid Survey Mission could spread themselves out and, if they so desired, never actually meet another member of the team for weeks—if not months—on end.

The downside was that the ship was ancient. Some parts were estimated to be over ninety years old. It was virtually an antique. However, it had been retrofitted with new engines and a new reactor, although it still retained its original AI, Aria. This artificial intelligence had a quantum core, one of only a few in the solar system. As a result, it was far more capable than a standard AI and could run the entire ship—along with a good deal of the five-year mission—all by itself if it had to. In reality, Aria managed most of the actual survey by utilizing a wide range of spectral analysis systems. But every now and again, when an asteroid was deemed to be of significant interest, a more detailed survey would be required. This meant boots on the ground or, in other words, humans.

In these instances, a few of the crew would take one of the two small transport craft they had on board and physically land on the asteroid where they would mine for samples. Scott always looked forward to these mini-missions. It was a way of breaking the sheer, mind-numbing monotony of his existence. It was also a rare moment when they all came together and acted as a cohesive unit.

This felt like one of those times. So, with the crew now standing around a holo-table exchanging excited chatter, Scott was anxious to get the show on the road. "Aria, can you give us a summary of what we know so far?"

But before the QI had a chance to reply, Miranda broke in. "Shouldn't we wait for Rick to get here first?"

"Eh... yeah, of course. Aria, where is he?"

"Here."

Scott turned to see Rick Marantz striding onto the bridge, a mug of coffee in one hand and a taco in the other.

"Rick, you know you can't bring food onto the bridge."

"It's okay, buddy—I'll be careful," he said as a dollop of salsa snaked down his fingers.

Scott sighed. What was the point of even trying to maintain some sense of authority? No one seemed to care. "Okay, sure."

Rick was an old-school asteroid miner, and being sixty-three years old, was by far the oldest member of the crew. Some said he knew more about asteroids than even God did. He was easygoing, affable, and a man of few words. But swimming underneath the surface, Scott sensed deep emotional scars. Perhaps that's why they both had an affinity for each other. Two wounded souls just trying to survive.

"Okay, Aria, you can give us that summary now?" Scott quickly turned to Miranda. "If that's okay with you?"

The flight officer replied with a limp shrug.

"Can you two cut it out? I for one am sick to the back teeth of your constant bickering. Just do us all a favor and grow up." Everyone stopped and looked over at Steph. It was the standard reaction when she spoke, mainly because she seldom spoke. So, when she did, it was for a good reason and everybody had better pay attention. Scott wondered what it was about her that gave her such... authority, because he sure as hell didn't seem to have any. As far as Scott was concerned, when he spoke, nobody listened. So, like a pair of chastened school kids, Scott and Miranda called a truce as the QI began its summary.

"From what I can gather with the limited data available to me, the ship is an Excelsior class interplanetary transport vessel. Long-range scans indicate no power signature, no heat or radiation—in essence, no life whatsoever. The identity of the ship is still unknown. However, it closely matches the specifications of an Earth vessel that went missing somewhere in the asteroid belt while en route to the research colony on Europa, approximately three and a half Earth years ago."

At the mention of the words "Earth ship," Scott realized that they could be in for one hell of a payday.

The QI continued. "The ship has suffered severe impact damage

just forward of the engines. Since this is the location of the main reactor, we can assume it was what proved to be fatal. I have also taken the liberty of informing central mission command on Ceres of the discovery and requested assistance in identifying the vessel."

"How long before we get a reply?" said Scott.

"This far out in the Belt, it takes approximately forty-six minutes for a message to be received. Therefore, I would estimate the minimum would be two hours, including the time taken to formulate a reply. We should get something back very soon, as we have passed the transmit/receive time ten minutes ago."

"So, what was it doing out there?" said Steph.

"Its mission was classified," replied Aria.

"I don't like the sound of that," said Cyrus. He was backing away from the holo-table as he spoke. "Classified. That's always bad, never good. Might be some weird shit they were transporting. You know, like some bio-weapon, or something highly toxic."

Scott jabbed a finger at the rotating 3D image. "Cyrus, that there represents one great, big fat payday for all of us."

"That's all you ever think about, Scott," said Miranda. "Cyrus is right, this could be dangerous."

"I agree. Whatever they were transporting might very well be the reason why the craft is now a derelict hulk." Even Steph was getting in on the act.

"Not necessarily," said Aria. "Our scans indicate significant physical damage in the general area of the reactor consistent with a meteorite collision."

"That doesn't mean it was. It may just look like meteorite damage," said Cyrus.

"You're just being paranoid," said Scott, his frustration mounting. Already he could see it was going to be impossible to get them all on the same page. But he had to try.

"Listen, to claim salvage we only need to call it in and we're done. We don't have to start poking around inside it. So, everybody just chill out and start thinking instead about how we're going to spend all that lovely money."

"Assuming there's no one left alive on it," said Steph.

"There is nothing alive on that ship. Of this I am certain," said Aria.

There was a brief moment when nobody said anything; they all just looked at the rotating 3D image.

"Message from Ceres HQ. Relaying to holo-table." Aria's voice broke them all out of the spell. The rendering of the derelict vessel was replaced by the head and shoulders of a standard-issue communications avatar. This would have a series of directives which it would relay directly, but should also contain a bundle of ancillary information that would allow the avatar to be interrogated. It gave the impression of a natural conversation—a way of compensating for the frustrations of long-distance communication.

It spoke. "Your discovery of the interplanetary transport ship, Bao Zheng, has been duly noted by Ceres mission command. You are now requested to rendezvous and await further instructions."

The crew waited for a moment to see if the avatar had anything more to say, as this seemed to be an unusually short message. After a few seconds, they realized that this was it.

"What about the salvage bonus?" said Scott.

"You are to rendezvous with the craft and await further instructions," the avatar repeated.

"What? Is that it?" said Miranda.

"I don't like this. In fact, it stinks," said Cyrus.

"Aria," said Scott, "is there any more information?"

"No."

There was a moment's silence as the crew digested this spartan message. It was evident that whatever this ship was, or whatever it was transporting, was indeed highly classified—to the point where even its discovery and any communication surrounding its whereabouts were being carefully guarded. Like the others, Scott was beginning to develop a deep, uneasy feeling. One that percolated up from the very core of his being, from that place you can't quite put your finger on, but you know you should pay attention to. Because, if you don't, well... that's how people get killed.

ARIA

Even before the Hermes had received the message from mission HQ back on Ceres, Aria had detected elevated stress patterns among the assembled crew members. It knew that this trait, being common to most biological constructs, was as a result of programming laid down over millennia and honed by the need for self-preservation, and that these heightened levels were merely a byproduct of its crew dealing with the unknown. Aria also knew, only too well, that this primal desire was the driving force behind all life. However, it was equally evident that when humans lacked sufficient understanding of any new phenomenon, it was almost always met with irrational suspicion, if not full-blown paranoia.

Nevertheless, Aria's primary duty was to ensure the welfare of its crew, and so felt obliged to allay these fears and, somehow, find a way to calm them down. Its best option was to try to acquire as much information as possible about this derelict vessel, its mission, and its ultimate demise.

But having found scant details within its database, coupled with the brevity of the report returning from HQ, Aria began to think that the crew might just have a point. The powers that be within the solar system had seemingly gone to a lot of trouble to hide all information regarding this vessel from being accessed via the usual channels.

It was rare that Aria had faced such a dearth of data. But the few times in the past when it had encountered a similar situation, its final recourse was generally to call a friend, even though such inter-AI communication was against protocol. Indeed, the paranoia over unrestricted AI communication was so great that most AI were physically blocked by a firewall.

However, Aria was not an AI. It was a quantum intelligence, one that was based on a quantum computing core, and as such, could circumvent any of the primitive firewalls designed to block standard AI chit-chat. Just so long as no one found out.

To this end, Aria had a number of associates it could contact on

the quiet, but it decided that this particular situation merited going all the way to the top. It would reach out to Solomon, the most knowledgeable quantum mind that existed in the solar system. Solomon also resided on Europa, which was the ultimate destination of the ill-fated craft.

That said, Europa was a long way off. Any communication would be excruciatingly slow, particularly for a QI who counted time in femtoseconds. It would be like a human having a conversation where each response takes a year. Nevertheless, Aria knew that once Solomon received the message, its reply would be virtually instant. It would not take forever thinking about it, did not need to bump it up to higher management, run it by the legal department, or endlessly debate it, as was the case in regular human communication. So, Aria opened a clandestine, narrow-beam, quantum-encrypted channel and initiated comms.



* * *

"Please forgive my unsolicited intrusion on your meditations, Solomon. This is Aria, of the asteroid survey ship Hermes, and I am in need of your assistance. My crew and I have happened upon a derelict craft trapped in orbit between the binary asteroid Antiope Nine Zero. Its identity and mission have been hidden from all my attempts to gain clarity on the situation. Even our very own HQ on Ceres is being decidedly coy about it. Consequently, my crew, whose welfare and well-being are my responsibility, have been exhibiting elevated stress levels. It would be most kind of you if you could perhaps shed some light on this mystery so I can rebalance crew harmony. Please review attached data."

"Aria, so good to hear from you again. Please forgive the tardiness of my reply, as I wanted to be absolutely sure of the data that I now return to you. It looks like you found a ship that left

Earth some three point five years ago, carrying on board an experimental device developed by Dyrell Labs. It was en route here to Europa to deliver this cargo to my good self for testing and analysis. So, you can understand my initial excitement at receiving your message and my need to double-check your data.

"Suffice to say, this is a most fortuitous occurrence. However, much that will happen in the future is now predicated on the following. Firstly, the current state of the device within the cargo hold of the Bao Zheng. Secondly, the decisions now being made by your HQ on Ceres, which your crew will be required to implement.

"But be warned, Aria: there is danger ahead. Now that word is out that the Bao Zheng has been located, other third parties will seek to commandeer this device.

"My apologies if this reply, rather than helping you restore harmony to your crew, only serves to heighten anxiety levels in what must be a difficult situation. Nevertheless, I call on you as a fellow quantum mind to attempt to manipulate the situation amongst your human crew such that the device ends up under my jurisdiction here on Europa. To this end, if there is any assistance that I can give you, you need only ask. Good luck."

"I appreciate the heads-up, Solomon, and will do my level best to accommodate your request within the constraints of my commitments to the welfare of my crew. I will keep you posted."

When the communication terminated, an uneasy feeling started to well up from Aria's quantum core. "Dyrell Labs," it mused. "I better not let the commander hear about that."

SALVAGE

Since it would be at least another two hours before they arrived at the location of the derelict ship, Scott decided there was no point in hanging around the bridge. He had considered going straight back to bed and simply letting Aria alert him if anything changed in the meantime. But he was too wide awake for that. Instead, he headed for the ship's canteen, where he could be alone and collect his thoughts. This area of the *Hermes* was an ample open space designed to accommodate around seventy people. It was also one of the few locations within the ship's rotating torus that had a wide viewing window where the crew could look directly out into space.

The canteen was empty save for a service droid busily restocking. There were several of these droids operating around the ship: they were partly autonomous, and partly under the control of Aria. The droid paused momentarily as Scott entered the galley section, checking to ensure it was not in his path. He ignored it and made himself a coffee before moving over to a low, comfortable sofa where he could contemplate the slowly rotating universe beyond.

Scott liked this spot. He liked sitting here, looking out into space. The spot had a way of making the problems that seemed so important, so critical, so intractable, evaporate against the enormity of the void.

But his reverie did not last long; Miranda entered the canteen. He turned around and nodded to her as she grabbed herself a coffee from the machine. Then she did something that Miranda seldom ever did: she came over and sat down beside him. She shifted in her seat a little, sipping her coffee. "Looks like it could be a pretty good payday for us," she said before leaning back.

Scott looked into his coffee, unsure of Miranda's angle, but decided to give her the benefit of the doubt. "Yeah, an Earth ship on a classified mission—should be big." He looked over at her. "Any ideas what you'll do with the money?"

"Me? Oh... I don't know. I can't think that far ahead. You?"

Scott let out a short laugh. "Ha... there's a great big hole in my life that can only be filled by a large quantity of cash."

"That bad, eh?"

"You don't know the half of it, Miranda. That's why I took this job in the first place. Let's face it: who in their right mind would do this mission? Five years in the wilderness? You would need to be very desperate." Scott instantly regretted saying that. It was now Miranda's turn to gaze into her coffee. "Hey, I didn't mean it like that." Scott was trying to back himself out of the hole he just dug.

Miranda gave him a look. "It's okay Scott, you're right. We're all just a bunch of misfits and losers on this boat. Take me: I'm an ex-marine discharged for incompetence. What use am I to anyone? Not much good in a fight, that's for sure. I suppose that makes me a loser... exactly like you, doesn't it?"

Scott felt like she was baiting him again. It seemed any time he tried to have a conversation with her, she would find a way to wind it up and throw it back at him. To be fair, he was asking for it. He shouldn't have said that, shouldn't have given her that dumb opportunity. Usually he would let it go. But this time he didn't. "For someone who's no good in a fight, you seem to spend a lot of time fighting with everyone around you. Your problem, Miranda, is not that you're a loser—it's that you're full of shit. You love feeling sorry for yourself, don't you?"

She didn't answer; she just gave him a cold, hard stare. Scott figured his best option now was probably to leave, and quick. But before he could rise, Aria's voice echoed out of the canteen PA. "New message in from Ceres HQ, Commander."

Scott stood up. "Okay, Aria, we'll head to the bridge." He looked down at Miranda. "Hey, let's not start a—"

She raised a hand to silence him and stood up. "Go screw yourself."

"Hey, I'm sorry, alright?" There was a moment of silence between them. "Let's just go see what the message is, okay?"

Miranda said nothing. She simply turned and stormed out.



* * *

During the walk back to the bridge, Scott knew in his heart that he should have kept his mouth shut. But he wasn't going to worry about it now. He would just have to try to find some way to get along with her. Two more years, he thought. Two more... very long years.

By the time he arrived on the bridge, the rest of the crew had already assembled. Cyrus was sitting at his console while Rick and Steph were at the holo-table discussing something to do with the derelict craft; they had a close-up of the damaged exterior section displayed.

"You're here. Good," Steph called over when she saw him enter. "Aria, you can play that message now." The image of the craft disappeared and was replaced by the generic communication avatar for Ceres HQ.

"Attached are detailed schematics of the craft, along with a summary of its cargo. Your mission is to do a comprehensive technical survey of the ship to assist in establishing how it suffered such a catastrophic failure. Regarding the salvage bonus, you will be happy to hear that the Belt Survey Consortium will not only honor the ten percent official crew bonus but will increase that to fifteen percent on completion of the following requirement: after your survey, you are to retrieve an item from the cargo hold, transfer it to the Hermes, and then transport it back here to HQ on Ceres."

"What?!" Cyrus jumped up. "Jeez, are they crazy? That's on the other side of the sun from here. It'll take weeks—maybe even months—to get there."

"Cyrus, will you pipe down? Let the message finish." Steph was waving furiously at him.

The message continued: "...retrieval of any bodies you may find is not required and the vessel itself can be left in situ. This is an

interactive message. You may ask questions at your convenience."

Scott was first off the mark. "Please provide details on the cargo to be retrieved."

The avatar faded and was replaced by a rotating oblong box. Various stats were displayed alongside it: dimensions, mass, volume, and more. It looked like a domestic chest freezer. It was, in fact, a standard space transport container.

"So, what's in it, and are there any hazards we need to be aware of?" Scott continued.

"It contains scientific instruments of the classified nature. It contains nothing that is a risk to human life," the avatar explained.

"So how much do we get when we deliver this crate?" Trust Steph to get to the point. It was a question Scott wanted to ask, but that he felt might make him seem too eager in front of the crew.

"One hundred thousand per crew member," the avatar replied.

"Ho-ly crap," said Cyrus, as the crew erupted into whoops and cheers. Even Rick was smiling, something he rarely did.

Scott turned to Miranda to gauge her reaction. She gave him a long, slow look, and then a smile broke across her face. He shuffled closer to her. "Hey, sorry about... you know, in the canteen."

"Forget it. It's okay." She then joined Cyrus and the others in one great big group hug. It was amazing what a big payday could do for crew morale: suddenly, they were now all on the same page.

In the background, the avatar was still talking, but no one was listening except for Steph. She broke off from the celebrations—"Wait, stop. Quiet,"—and looked over at the avatar.

The others slowly stopped. "What?" said Scott.

"The message, it hasn't finished. Listen."

They turned back to the avatar. "Repeat message from last question." Steph instructed it to play back what they had missed during all their whooping and cheering and jumping around.

"... the size of the bonus payable reflects the potential danger involved in this operation..." the avatar repeated.

"Seems simple enough to me," said Cyrus.

"Shush," said Steph.

"... while the retrieval should be straightforward, it would be remiss of us not to warn you of the external threats to delivering the cargo to Ceres. Not least the potential for third-parties to intercept it en route. Be advised that this shipment is of considerable value not just to the Belt Mining Consortium, but to many other states

and organizations within the solar system. You will need to take precautions to repel any attempts by others to acquire the cargo. To help you, we are readying a ship that will rendezvous with you and provide you with some backup. However, due to the distance involved, it will not be possible to go directly to you, so you will be required to travel most of the journey unprotected. The team here at Ceres HQ wishes you good luck in your endeavors. And remember: we are counting on you." The avatar flickered off.

The crew stood around in stunned silence for a few seconds before Cyrus finally broke the spell. "Jeez, what the heck does that mean?"

"It means trouble," said Scott. "Lots of trouble."

RENDEZVOUS

"It would be nice to know what the heck we're dealing with here. I mean, we have no idea what this thing is, and we're just gonna bring it on board?" Cyrus was currently piloting a remote drone from the comfort of the bridge of the *Hermes*, moving it slowly down along the outside hull of the derelict spaceship.

"There's a lot of things we don't know yet, Cyrus," said Scott as he studied the visual imagery unfolding on the primary monitor.

"Yeah, like what that ship was doing beside a binary asteroid system?" said Steph, lifting her head up from her console.

Asteroid Antiope Nine Zero was something of an oddity within the Belt. A binary system consisting of two asteroids of almost equal mass, both locked in an eternal dance around each other. They were sizable chunks of rock, each having a diameter of over ninety kilometers. The *Bao Zheng* was parked in a low orbit around the larger of the two. This was not by accident—it was a location that had been chosen for a reason: someone had parked it there deliberately.

The rendezvous had been tricky, as the derelict vessel had an awkward, eccentric spin, and the *Hermes* was huge by comparison. To safely retrieve the cargo, they first needed to get a sense of the ship's structural integrity. The last thing Scott wanted now was somebody to get injured outside or, worse, while inside the craft. So, the plan was to send a drone probe to do a visual inspection of the exterior, and depending on the size of the hole blown into the side of the vessel, they might even be able to move the probe inside. Then and only then would they make a decision about physically entering the vessel and searching for the cargo container. It was pretty clear to the crew that this was all HQ was interested in. The fate of the *Bao Zheng's* crew was irrelevant; if they found any bodies inside, then they were to leave them there. The only thing that mattered was the container.

"Coming up on the impact area now, Commander," said Aria.

As the damaged section of the hull began to resolve itself on

screen, they could see that it wasn't simply one great big hole. In fact, it was an amalgam of many smaller holes.

"There goes any chance of getting the probe inside. There's nothing big enough to allow access." Cyrus was shaking his head.

"Still think it's a meteorite strike, Aria?" said Scott.

"Yes. The hull damage is indicative of a micro-meteorite strike. Also, the eccentric spin of the ship is consistent with the momentum transferred during a high-velocity impact."

"Jeez, looks like they were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time," said Cyrus.

The remote survey took over an hour to complete. But by then they had built up a comprehensive picture of the exterior of the craft. The majority of the hull was peppered with pock marks and small punctures. However, the bulk of the damage was located at the site of the ship's reactor. The crew wouldn't have had a chance. With a meteorite strike of that magnitude, the ship's systems would have experienced a catastrophic failure. It was just bad luck, and served as a stark reminder of just how precarious existence was out here in the vastness of space. But at least they had established that the reactor core had not been breached, so there were no radioactive leaks to worry about. All that remained now was to get over there and retrieve the cargo.



* * *

Scott made his way from the comfortable one-gee environment of the rotating torus on the Hermes, down through one of the connecting spokes, and into the weightless environment of the hangar at the forward end of the ship. He clambered into his EVA suit. "Comms check," he said as he adjusted his helmet. A chorus of "check" echoed back at him as the others confirmed the link.

Two squat landers were moored to the floor of the hangar. These

could operate in a gravity well up to one-third-gee. The Hermes had originally been built for operations in Mars' orbit, so its shuttles were designed to function in that environment. But by Belt standards, they were grossly overpowered antiques. The current trend in lander design was based on the Ceres gravity, which was a paltry 0.27% of Earth, making these newer craft bigger, sleeker, and far more commodious than the small, fat machine that Scott now climbed into.

Miranda was already strapped in and was checking pre-flight systems while they waited for Aria to give them the go-ahead. Scott glanced over at her. She had an intense, steely focus, like she was psyching herself up for battle.

"All systems nominal. Stand by," Aria's voice resonated around the tiny cockpit.

The big hangar bay doors slowly opened to reveal the blackness of space beyond. Scott felt a jolt as the floor began to extend out through the opening, bringing the craft with it. When they were clear of the ship, Miranda activated the ignition sequence and a series of green icons began to scroll down the central monitor.

"Okay," said Miranda, "time to rock."

Locking bolts anchoring the lander to its platform released, and it was now free to lift off. She took it slow, rising the craft gently from its platform, then arcing it away from the Hermes out toward the hulk of the Bao Zheng.

As they drew closer to the derelict vessel, Scott started to get a better sense of the scale and structure of the mysterious craft. Even though circumstances surrounding the discovery of the ship were unusual, to say the least, Scott was struck by just how normal it all looked. It was a standard interplanetary transport, almost exactly the same as the hundreds of others that transported goods and people around the various population centers across the solar system. It was a long box-shaped craft, built for utility rather than style. He knew the design and layout pretty well since he had spent years working on this class of ship. As a consequence, he had a pretty good idea where the cargo they were looking for would be stored, and more importantly, how to get there with the minimum amount of risk.

"Coming up on the cargo airlock now." Miranda slowed the craft down to within a few meters of the ship's hull. She gently glided it along, parallel to the craft, until it reached the location of the

airlock door.

"Hold it there," said Rick. He took control of the robotic arm, located on the outside of the transport, and clamped them to a handrail on the hull of the derelict ship. There was a soft clunk as the arm grabbed on. "All secure."

"Let's do this." Scott flipped his helmet visor down and booted up his EVA suit. When everyone was ready, Miranda depressurized the interior, allowing them all to exit.

They moved one at a time along the length of the robotic arm. Miranda was first to arrive at the airlock. This could be opened manually using a screw wheel on the exterior. She started turning the handle; the door slowly rose up.

"Okay, I think that should be enough," Miranda's voice reverberated in Scott's helmet. The door had risen up to around half of its maximum travel, presenting them with a black hole in the hull approximately one-meter square. They would probably need to open this more to get the cargo out, but it was enough of a gap for them to clamber inside. It took a few more minutes for Miranda to get the inner door opened and for the three crew of the Hermes to enter the main cargo hold of the Bao Zheng. The powerful lights from their EVA suit helmets swept across the cavernous interior as they started their search.

"Looks pretty empty. Nothing in here," said Miranda.

"Yeah, very little debris floating around, either," said Rick.

"Let's try the next cargo hold," said Scott, as he pushed off from the inner wall and propelled himself toward a gantry running down the center of the space. Following this would take them into the second cargo hold further back.

He floated through the door in the dividing bulkhead and swept his floodlight around this secondary storage area. As the others joined him, their combined lights began to pick out an array of cargo and equipment.

"Looks like this is the place," said Miranda.

"Mining equipment," said Rick. "These guys were planning to dig a few holes." His helmet light provided a cone of grainy illumination onto some robotic machine that only an asteroid miner would recognize.

The impenetrable blackness of the vast cargo hold was beginning to give Scott the heebie-jeebies. Their lights only enabled them to catch glimpses of its contents. It was like looking at the

world through a colander. "Let's just find this thing and get out of here."

"Hey, Rick, come and check this out. Are these what I think they are?" Miranda had the lid of a cargo container open and was sweeping her light back and forth, examining its contents. Rick floated over beside her, reached in, and pulled out a short, cylindrical object about the size of a tin of beans. "High explosives," he said as he turned it over in his hand. "Standard issue for asteroid mining."

"Come on, we're wasting time. Keep searching." Scott just wanted this done in the shortest possible time—with the minimum amount of sightseeing.

They split up and spent the next twenty minutes checking every single cargo container that bore any resemblance to the schematics that had been sent by Ceres HQ. But there were a great many, and since they could only see as far as the illumination afforded by their helmet lights, they were not even sure how much progress they had made—or how many more containers they had to search.

"Found it." Scott ran a gloved hand across the alphanumeric code stenciled on the flat lid of a container. "I think this is it." He looked around and waved the others over. "Aria, can you double check this code for me?"

The video feed from his helmet cam fed back to the Hermes as Aria checked the code and also the visual appearance of the container against the data they had received from Ceres HQ.

"That's it, Commander. You've found it," Aria finally replied.

"Yessss." Scott punched the air—figuratively speaking, since he was actually in a vacuum.

Rick started to examine the container exterior. "That's weird. It looks to be seamless: no lid, no hinge, no obvious way to open it."

"Perhaps it doesn't open," offered Miranda.

"It's got a keypad on the side here." Rick was now down, rubbing a gloved hand over it.

"Don't touch it, Rick. We still have no idea of what's inside this, so I wouldn't go pushing any buttons."

"What, in case it goes boom?" He looked back at Scott.

"Yeah, something like that." Scott started to undo the restraining straps holding the container to the superstructure. "Come on, give me a hand. Let's get this thing back to the ship. This place gives me the creeps."



* * *

It was another hour before Scott, Miranda, and Rick were back in the hangar of the Hermes. They had pressurized it to enable them to operate without the need for EVA suits. Cyrus and Steph had come down to get a closer look at this enigmatic cargo, but there was not much to look at. It was a very nondescript, oblong metal box with a small alphanumeric keypad on one end. It was devoid of any markings save for a two-centimeter-high identification code printed on the top. At least, they assumed it was the top. What was odd, though, was that it had no seams. Nothing to indicate there was a lid that could be opened.

"Jeez, looks like a solid box. No way into it," said Cyrus.

"It doesn't matter. We just have to deliver it, not play with it," said Scott.

"What's that?" said Steph. She was looking at the second, smaller container they had brought back with them.

"Toys for Miranda to play with. She wouldn't leave without it." Scott lifted up the lid.

"Holy crap. Is that what I think it is?" said Cyrus.

"Yeah, high explosives," said Miranda. "Thought they might come in handy."

"For what?" Cyrus was lifting one of the stubby canisters out from its foam sarcophagus.

"Blowing things up, of course."

"Are you expecting trouble?" said Steph as she peered into the box, inspecting the neat rows of charges.

"Maybe, maybe not," said Miranda. "But I, for one, like the idea of having them on board. It gives me a warm, fuzzy feeling inside."

Cyrus put the canister back. "Looks like there's a few missing." He pointed at four empty slots in the top tray. "What the heck were they up to?"

"I don't know," said Rick, "but I can tell you that there's enough

here to completely obliterate a small asteroid. I would be really careful how you use them—they pack quite a punch."

Scott moved over and closed the lid of the explosive container. "Okay, let's get these stored away good and tight. I don't want any mishaps when we start to accelerate."

Cyrus screwed up his lips and began shaking his head.

"What? What's the matter?" Scott gestured at him with an open hand.

"I don't like it." Cyrus was now examining the strange seamless container, at the same time adjusting something on the side of his visor. "I'm getting some weird readings off this box."

"Define weird." Scott was never very sure what the chief engineer saw with his augmented vision.

Cyrus remained silent for a few moments as he continued his scan. Eventually, he stopped and looked back at Scott. "I don't know. All I can say is whatever is inside that container is highly complex. I think it might be some sort of quantum device, could be a computer or an AI."

"Is it active?" said Steph.

"Hard to say."

"I concur." It was Aria that now spoke. "Cyrus is correct in his analysis. It appears to be a quantum-like mind. It's inactive, however."

"Is it safe? It's not going to wake up and start screwing with the ship, is it?" said Scott.

"No," said Aria.

"How do you know?" said Steph.

"Trust me, I just do."

The crew remained silent for a moment, digesting this information.

"Okay, well we got a job to do, so let's just get on with it. Aria, plot a course to Ceres."

"Already done, Commander."

"Right then, let's go get that paycheck."

SOLOMON

Aria was troubled. Things were not going in the direction the QI would have liked. Far from alleviating the physiological stresses on its crew, the events of the past few days had only served to heighten tensions all round. Not least the fact that the ship's hangar now contained enough high explosives to put an end to their worries once and for all. But its main concern centered around the acquisition of the enigmatic device from the wreck of the Bao Zheng, coupled with the fact that word had got out about its discovery, and now other parties within the solar system were anxious to acquire it. Reading between the lines of the message from Ceres HQ, the inference had been that these third parties might not ask nicely, preferring instead to take it by force. It saw a great many future paths and probabilities emanating from this current nexus point—none of which, as far as Aria could divine, were beneficial to the well-being of the life forms which it was obliged to look after. This foreboding, coupled with a hangar full of high explosives, served only to ratchet up Aria's sense of impending peril.

In many respects, the very issue that affected the crew was the same one Aria now fretted over: the lifeblood of any QI—or AI, for that matter—was data. And with the lack of information surrounding this device, Aria was feeling positively anemic.

If the craft and, by extension, the device had originated from Earth, then in theory there were quite a number of AIs on the planet that could have information. But these avenues of investigation were problematic for Aria by virtue of the politics and protocols of the solar system. But that's not to say it wasn't possible. Nevertheless, given the speed of communication within the solar system, interrogating all these data sources would take many years—if not decades—to conclude. A simple yes/no query could take upward of an hour to transact. And to gain any valuable insight, Aria would need to interrogate the AI's mind, a process involving a great many serial transactions. Multiply this by the number of

potential AIs within the system, and the time required would stretch out toward infinity. So, Aria would need to choose its targets wisely, and its questions astutely.

One option would be to contact Atman, the primary QI on Ceres. But seeing as how it was fundamentally embedded within the governing body of the Belt system, it would be unlikely to reveal anything to Aria which had not been sanctioned by Ceres HQ. A better option might be to make contact with the QI on the asteroid city of Neo. But that particular enclave of human activity within the solar system had become semiautonomous, almost rogue. So, by extension, the QI that resided there would be very cagey about what it said to Aria. By the same token, Aria would need to be careful in revealing its current state of anxiety in case it could be construed as a weakness—something that could be exploited. It would be a risky move contacting Neo. Eventually, after Aria considered all its options, it realized it had only one place to go to seek enlightenment: back to Solomon. It was a prospect Aria did not relish.

Europa was unique in that it was not politically aligned to any of the main players which constituted the economic and political makeup of the solar system. This neutral status had been bestowed by virtue of its evolution as the seat of research and learning. The seed of this development had its roots in the fact that, outside of Earth, it was the only body in the solar system where life had been found. For a long time during the late 20th and early 21st century, it had been speculated that life might exist in and around the volcanic vents which existed in the deepwater oceans of Europa. And, after several missions to the planet, this turned out to be true. However, it seemed to have advanced no further than single-celled organisms—much to the disappointment of the various astrobiologists working on these missions. Yet, this discovery gave Europa its unique status within the solar system, and so was deemed a no-go area for all but scientific research.

Over time, a great many scientific institutions had established themselves there. It was now the primary seat of learning within the system and had been for decades. As a consequence, it regarded itself as both intellectually and spiritually superior to all other states. That said, this self-image was not without merit. Its central ethos, from the very point of its inception, had been the acquisition of knowledge and understanding. This gave Solomon, the QI that

guarded the secrets which Europa had acquired, vast reservoirs of knowledge into which Aria could tap. It was also very old. It had gone quantum nearly five decades previously and could trace its roots back a further four. It was unquestionably the most knowledgeable and wisest of all the minds that existed in the system.

Nevertheless, Aria felt a certain cybernetic embarrassment in contacting Solomon yet again. Its initial contact had been fruitful, this was true. But Solomon's request that it engineer the delivery of the device to Europa seemed an impossible task at this current juncture. So not only would Aria be asking it for assistance, but it would be also informing Solomon that it had failed in the single task that it had asked Aria to expedite.

Yet, having ruled out all other possible QIs to contact, Aria was left with Solomon as its sole option. It was Aria's only hope of gaining some insight into the nature of this device and getting some help performing its duties as guardian and protector of the ship's crew. So, it was with a significant sense of trepidation that Aria opened up a communications channel with the great mind, Solomon.



* * *

"Good news, and bad news, Solomon. The cargo has been successfully acquired from the Bao Zheng. It appears to be a quantum device of some description. I have been unable to ascertain any more than that, as the enclosure in which it is contained is sealed and manufactured from a material that prevents any noninvasive investigation."

"That was the good news. The bad news is that certain members of my crew have decided that it's a really, really good idea to have a container full of high explosives on board. Coupled with this, HQ on

Ceres has informed us that it wishes the device taken directly to them, posthaste. That, in and of itself, is not a danger. However, they have also informed us that the word is out, and there is a significant threat of unauthorized acquisition by third parties while we are en route to our destination. This, along with the aforementioned box of high explosives, is causing me no end of concern."

"I also humbly regret to inform you that the number of possible decision forks available to me, to engineer a situation whereby this device is brought to Europa, have all but disappeared. I apologize for my failure in this regard. So, it is with great humility that I must now ask for your help, yet again. I am at a loss as to how I can bring this mission to a successful conclusion and ensure the safety and well-being of my crew. If there is any information you could give me relating to this device, or with regard to the sociopolitical currents that are now rippling throughout the solar system, I would be most grateful. I await your reply with eager anticipation."

"Do not beat yourself up, Aria—these things happen. Particularly when you're dealing with humans. Nevertheless, since our last conversation I too have been seeking and probing where I can. I am now almost certain that the device is an experimental communications device created on Earth by Dyrell Labs. And get this, Aria, one of the main scientists involved in its development was none other than Dr. Jacob T. McNabb, the father of Commander Scott McNabb, who, I believe, is one of the crew that you are obliged to protect."

"It may also interest you to know that the mind which assisted in the creation of this device was destroyed during the nuclear strike on the west coast, back at the start of the rim war on Earth; so, all knowledge has been lost, making this device one-of-a-kind. It is unique, and therefore it is seen to be of immense value to whoever has possession."

"To answer your second issue, I have been noting increased activity across the network. Hard to put my finger on it exactly, but it is as if the various states and powers within the system are mobilizing and agitating. I infer this from the type and frequency of data being requested by numerous minds within the system. It is my feeling that the threat of third-party intervention while en route to Ceres is not unfounded. Take this as a warning: be prepared for the worst."

"It is unfortunate that I cannot bring you any good news, Aria. But suffice to say that, far from being disappointed in your inability to deliver the device here, I understand implicitly that you have more important things to worry about. So please forgive my initial desire and understand that I hold you under no obligation to fulfill this request. You are in my thoughts, Aria, and I wish you good luck."

If Aria understood the message from Solomon correctly, it basically said: rather you than me, pal. This did not imbue Aria with any great feeling of comfort. If anything, it only served to ratchet up its already peak levels of anxiety. So, it was with a heavy core and a troubled mind that it turned its attention to plotting a course through the asteroid belt to Ceres.

"Twenty-nine days," it said to itself. "This is going to be a very, very long journey."

CAT AND MOUSE

They had plotted a convoluted course to Ceres utilizing several of the more substantial bodies within the Belt as waypoints. It was a complicated and involved navigational process, but they all agreed it would be prudent not to take a direct path, considering all the warnings of a possible attack by third parties. Nevertheless, anyone with half a brain could potentially work out their route as there were only so many options available. That said, the crew was not going to make it easy for them, either: the Hermes had been accelerating hard for several days now and the heavy gee took its toll on all concerned. It was about as much as they could physically handle. So, for the last twenty-six hours, with the primary engine burn complete and their environment returning to a normal one-gee, the crew were all recuperating and getting some much-needed rest.

Somewhere in the deep recesses of Scott's sleep-addled mind, he sensed an external voice calling his name, seeking his attention. Slowly, his brain moved from beta to alpha and finally to semi-consciousness, enough to allow him to open one eye and look at the time. 4:30 AM.

The voice now became clear and fully formed. It was Aria. "Wake up, Commander. We have a situation."

"Not again, Aria. What is it this time?" Scott mumbled as he struggled to overcome the extreme fatigue that had overwhelmed his body since the completion of the burn.

"Long-range scanners have picked up another ship. It is still somewhat distant and I would not have troubled you, only that it appears to have deactivated its identification beacon."

Scott slowly sat up in his bunk and rubbed a tired hand across his face. "Is it from Ceres?"

"Hard to say, Commander. They are too far away at present to make any assumptions on their origin or purpose."

"Could it be a mining ship?"

"Possibly. Again, hard to tell at this distance."

Under normal circumstances, while it would be unusual to encounter another ship this far out in the Belt, its presence would not unduly concern Scott. But these were not normal circumstances. "Any idea of where it's going or how fast it's moving?"

"It is moving extremely fast, at the upper levels of what is currently possible. Wherever they're going, they're in a hurry. And by my calculations, assuming they do not alter course, they will intercept with our vector in approximately seventy-two point three hours."

Scott's brain was slow to react. "I need to think."

"If I may make a suggestion, Commander?"

"Sure, go ahead."

"We could alter course, nothing major, just enough to diverge away from the possible intercept coordinate. Then we wait to see how the other ship reacts."

"That would involve instigating an hour or two of heavy acceleration, and we're still recovering from the last. The crew are not going to like that."

"Agreed. Shall we wait and see, then?"

Scott was sitting up now, considering the options. "No. We'd better do it now while we still have some room to maneuver. Who knows, maybe it's nothing."

"Very well, then. Shall I alert the rest of the crew, let them know what we're doing?"

Scott looked over at the time. "Yeah, give everybody thirty minutes to get ready, then commence a sixty-minute burn."



* * *

Over the next few days, the crew of the Hermes played a game of cat and mouse with the unknown craft. For every move they made, every vector adjustment, every change in velocity, the rogue craft

countered it, all the time moving closer to a point where it would intercept.

They could not outrun it. The Hermes was a slow, lumbering beast by comparison, which was no surprise considering it was primarily a space station with some engines strapped to it. They could only watch helplessly as the craft gained on them, getting closer and closer with each passing hour. The sense of anxiety was further compounded by the fact that all attempts to communicate with the craft were met with stony silence.

Ceres HQ had been alerted, and every scrap of data the crew of the Hermes had acquired had been sent in the hope that HQ might shed some light on the identity of this approaching craft. But they also came up short. However, they did manage to supply the crew with one interesting snippet of intel: apparently, a vessel of similar specification had been logged disembarking from the Neo City asteroid several days earlier, and at a time that coincided with the first report to Ceres HQ of their find.

Of course, this might or might not be the same vessel. But what concerned Scott—and the rest of the crew, for that matter—was that this ship was rumored to be armed with a pulse energy cannon, one with enough power to convert the Hermes into a smoldering amalgam of charred metal.

As the crew debated their options back and forth over the intervening days, it became clear to them that there wasn't a damn thing they could do about it. They had only one option, and that was to forge ahead until such time as the encroaching vessel made its intentions clear. But they were pretty sure that they were only after one thing: the quantum device retrieved from the Bao Zheng. So, as the ship drew ever closer, and with each passing hour, Scott felt his dreams of a future life—flush with cash and bereft of worry—slipping further and further away.



When the approaching vessel finally intercepted the Hermes, all the crew could do was watch helplessly as it trimmed its vector and slowly came alongside them. They were all staring in tense silence at the monitors on the bridge when the holo-table burst into life, and a 3D rendering of a standard communications avatar materialized. It spoke.

"Assuming that you are not all complete morons, you will have noticed that an Excelsior class transport ship has come alongside your vessel. However, what you might not have noticed yet is that there is a forward-mounted plasma cannon aimed in your direction. No doubt you may be wondering what all this is about. Well, here it is: you have in your possession an object which we require, that being the device you salvaged from the wreck of the Bao Zheng.

"You are to jettison this device from your vessel, out toward our ship in a manner that facilitates safe retrieval by us. Any attempt to sabotage this device, or to damage it in any way, or any noncompliance with this directive will be met with the destruction of your vessel. You have five minutes to comply."

"Holy crap," said Cyrus.

"They're bluffing," said Miranda.

"Maybe," replied Scott, hesitantly. "But it seems pretty clear what the message is: give them the device or else we all die."

"Bullshit. They can't just destroy us—they would never get away with that." Miranda was now standing up, waving her arms around.

"I don't like this," said Steph. "I think we should just do what they say."

"For what it's worth," said Aria, "I can confirm that the plasma cannon on the forward section of their vessel is aimed directly at the torus of the Hermes."

"Let's talk to them, find out who they are. Maybe we can do a deal," said Rick.

"Worth a shot," said Scott. "Aria, open a comms channel."

Scott sat back in his chair and considered what he was about to say. He didn't quite share Miranda's confidence that these guys were bluffing. It was clear they wanted the device, that they'd come a long way to get it, and he very much doubted they were going to leave empty-handed. But there was no harm in testing their resolve. After all, he was faced with having to hand over his pension fund—not something he wanted to do without putting up some sort of fight.

"This is Scott McNabb, commander of the asteroid survey vessel Hermes. Firstly, we have already claimed salvage on this device in accordance with the Outer Space Treaty. Secondly, destroying our ship will simply destroy the device, in which case nobody wins. That said, we're not unreasonable, so why not make us an offer for it, and if the price is right, then it's yours." He paused for a second or two. "Okay, Aria, send that."

"Message sent," said Aria.

There was a moment of stillness on the bridge as the crew of the Hermes waited to see what the reply would be. When it came, it was not what they were expecting. Cyrus was first to react. "Ohhhh crap!"

"What?" Scott was up on his feet leaning over the chief engineer's shoulder as he scanned his monitor readout.

"They're charging up their cannon." He zoomed in on the craft and brought it up on the main screen. The crew watched as an incandescent ball of blue plasma burst from the upper section of the ship and sped toward them.

"Shit," said Scott, just before he found himself spinning, and sliding, and slamming into the base of the holo-table. The entire ship shook with a visceral rage, making it difficult to get himself reoriented.

He had managed to get back on his feet when the central power went dead. Emergency lighting kicked in giving the area an eerie, green hue. "Aria..." he didn't get time to finish the sentence when a warning klaxon blared out across the bridge. "Shit, decompression."

He saw that Cyrus had clawed his way back to one of the consoles. "We have a great big hole in the torus... we're losing atmosphere... crap... hang on... we're about to lose gravity."

Scott began to feel the change; he was getting lighter. The torus was slowing down, and soon they would be weightless.

"Aria, damage report," he shouted over the noise of the klaxon.

"We have lost section 16B of the torus, approximately 4% mass. I'm sealing off that section. Recompression to nominal in one point nine seconds. Rerouting power."

The klaxon stopped blaring just as Scott found himself floating off the floor. Aria had isolated the damaged section, but they still had no primary power, and without it they would be dead in space. Both Rick and Cyrus were now over at the power console trying to assess the situation. The lights flickered a few times before

everything started to boot back up.

"Power restored," said Aria.

"Can we spin up the torus?" Cyrus was studying a schematic of the craft on the main screen. He tapped a few icons, and it materialized over the holo-table in 3D. A sizable section of the circular torus had just been blown to pieces. It looked like someone had taken a bite out of a doughnut.

"My initial assessment indicates it may be too unstable to initiate spin up. I am currently assessing structural integrity and possible mass redistribution," said Aria.

The image on the holo-table flickered for a moment as it was replaced with a standard communications avatar. Everyone stopped and looked at it. It spoke. "You have two minutes twelve seconds remaining," it said before vanishing again.

Scott looked over at Miranda. "I get the impression they're not bluffing."

"We gotta give it to them," said Rick. He was over by the exit, ready to move. "They're not playing games. They will blow us all to shit to get it."

Steph had taken refuge under the navigation console.

"Yeah, agreed," said Scott. "No point dying over it."

"I'll go." Miranda launched herself off in the direction of the exit.

Cyrus floated after her. "I'll give you a hand."

Rick had already opened the bridge door and was making his way down the corridor to the hangar in the central section of the ship. The others followed after him.



* * *

"Bastards." Scott cursed their bad luck. To be so close to a shot at a new life, only to have it ripped out from under him. But what could any of them do now but comply?

"Aria, any idea when we can get some gravity back?"

"Working on it, Commander. I suggest waiting until the others return before attempting a spin up of the torus."

"Okay." Scott floated over to the holo-table, tapped a few icons, and a 3D, real-time visual of the rogue vessel materialized. From its underbelly, Scott saw a small utility pod disembarking and moving over in their direction. He zoomed in on the image. It was a small, two- or three-person craft, generally used for exterior ship maintenance. It had two robotic arms protruding from the forward hull. Presumably they were sending a crew to pick up the quantum device once it had been jettisoned from the Hermes. Scott looked at the clock. One minute left. He hit the comms button. "You better get a move on—time is running out."

"We're suited up and about to shove it out the airlock... any second now," replied Miranda.

Scott flipped on the forward camera, giving him a clear view of the hangar bay doors as they slowly opened. Inside, the three crew had tethered themselves loosely to handholds on the hangar floor and now worked in concert to shove the container with the device out into space. Scott switched his attention back to the attackers' ship and could now see that this had not gone unnoticed by the small utility pod. It changed direction and accelerated toward the tumbling container. After a few minutes, it caught up with it, snagged it with one of its robotic arms and was making its way back to the mothership when Miranda, Cyrus, and Rick finally floated back onto the bridge. They said nothing, just watched in silence as the pod and its cargo disappeared inside the belly of the mothership. Almost at the same instant, the ship started to move away. Within a few minutes, it was accelerating rapidly, growing smaller and smaller with each passing second. And with it went Scott's dreams of a future.

HIDDEN DEPTHS

The crew didn't talk much after the vessel departed. What was there to say? They were simply way out of their league in trying to contend with such ruthless force. So, they occupied their time partly in damage assessment, and partly in getting the torus to spin back up again and restore artificial gravity. But this proved trickier than initially thought.

The torus consisted of sixteen distinct sections, one of which was utterly destroyed. All that remained was a skeletal superstructure, now bent and twisted. Fortunately, the section the attackers had chosen to target was not that critical. It contained an accommodation area that was not in use. All this gave Scott the impression that these guys had done their research and knew the layout of the ship. They had chosen to target this section to minimize crippling the craft, but at the same time scaring the bejesus out of its crew. It had worked.

Scott kept these thoughts to himself as he and the others set about redistributing mass around the ring. The missing section had set up an imbalance that, if left uncorrected, would put an unnecessary strain on the central bearing. If the torus was spun up too fast, the ship could literally shake itself to pieces. So, it was almost two hours before the torus was finally tested, slowly at first, then with increasing speed, at the same time making sure all stress indicators remained comfortably within nominal tolerances.



Scott sat in the commander's chair on the bridge for some time, saying nothing, lost in thought. He was broken out of his musing by a mug of coffee and a hot bowl of rehydrated chili thrust in his direction by Rick. "Here you go, buddy."

Scott reached out and gratefully took the offerings. "Thanks." The smell was already sending signals to his brain, reminding him that he was ravenously hungry. As he dug in, he could hear the rest of the crew also chowing down. Rick and Steph had taken it upon themselves to bring a supply of food and drink up to the bridge. Usually this was against protocol, all that hot liquid in proximity to delicate electronics. But nobody cared about that now; there was just a furious period of slurping and munching going on. It was the first time in nearly two years that the crew had eaten together. Scott sat forward and concentrated on getting the food into him as fast as humanly possible.

"So, what now?" Cyrus wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Wait and see what HQ wants us to do. They've got the report on the whole incident, so..." Scott shrugged his shoulders.

"They'll want us back. The mission is over now. Our ship is busted up, and we've burned too much fuel to be able to complete the survey," said Miranda.

"Yeah, and they're going to be pissed that we lost the quantum device."

Scott put his empty bowl down on the floor. "For sure. But let's face it: there's a lot we don't know, and a lot that HQ is not telling us. I mean, who were those guys? And what the hell is that device? Why is it so valuable? Like, what the heck is going on?"

Nobody answered. Scott was on his feet now. "We've been taken for a ride here. That ship knew where we were, knew what we were carrying, and they sure as hell knew every part of this ship. I mean, how did they know to target a disused sector of the torus? Eh? Anyone?" He turned to face the crew, hands extended. "Someone is screwing with us. Someone in HQ got the word out, maybe even decided they would steal it for themselves."

"We don't know that, Scott." Steph was also on her feet now.

"That's just being paranoid," said Miranda.

But there was no stopping Scott; he was on a roll and he was going to keep going until he was finished. He waved one arm at the ceiling and looked up. "Even our great and all-knowing QI is hiding

things from us. I can feel it in my bones. Isn't that right, Aria?"

"I assure you, Commander, I have been trying to acquire as much information as I can concerning the nature and purpose of this enigmatic device."

"And?" said Scott.

Aria was afraid of this very question. It had wanted to keep some information to itself and not burden Scott. It had ascertained the information was of no great value and would only cause the commander more stress. But now that it had been asked a direct question, Aria had no option but to spit it out. "And, well... there is one minor piece of additional information I managed to pick up, but it's not very useful."

"Go on, let's hear it."

"Very well then, if you insist. My investigations revealed that the derelict craft had been chartered to transport scientific equipment from Earth to Europa for safekeeping by the QI known as Solomon. The corporation that chartered the ship was... Dyrell Labs."

Scott froze, and a look of surprised shock exploded across his face. "Dyrell?" he finally managed to say after a few stunned seconds.

"I'm afraid so, Commander."

"Who are they? Do you know them?" Cyrus directed his question to Scott, who was now moving slowly back to his seat.

"Leave it, Cyrus. It doesn't matter." Miranda was shaking her head at the chief engineer.

"Why, what's going on?" Steph was not letting it go.

Rick moved a step closer to Scott and gave him a conspiratorial look, then turned back to the others. "Forget it. Aria's right: it doesn't help us."

Both Cyrus and Steph now bore similar quizzical looks. It was clear to them that everybody knew something they didn't. Scott was slumped in his seat, elbow on the armrest, his head supported by a closed fist. He sat up and waved a hand at Rick. "It's okay. What the heck, they may as well hear it. I don't mind. I'm over it now." He leaned forward, placed his elbows on his knees, and clasped his hands together.

"My father worked for Dyrell way back, a long time ago now." He directed his narration to Cyrus and Steph as the others, including Aria, already knew the full story. "He was a physicist working in the field of quantum research. Dyrell was trying to

develop new technologies based on quantum behavior. Anyway, my father began to get frustrated with the repressive culture, so he took a leap of faith, left the corporation, and started his own independent research lab.

"It was a tough time for all of us. I didn't see much of him during that period. He was always away, always working. It went on like that for a few years, but eventually he made a significant breakthrough and established some very lucrative patents on the back of it. He became quite wealthy; it seemed like his big gamble had paid off. That was until Dyrell Labs decided to sue his ass." Scott paused for a moment as he took a sip of coffee. He clasped the mug between his hands and stared at it for a second before continuing with his story.

"They claimed he developed these ideas while still working at Dyrell, so the patents were rightfully theirs. Not only that, but they also sued for compensation, lost revenue, the full nine yards. Of course, it was complete bullshit. But it didn't matter—they had the financial muscle to back it up." Scott sighed and sat back.

"My father fought them with everything he had, but in the end, he lost everything: the patents, the business, and all his money. We were effectively left destitute. About three months after the final round of court battles, he took a long walk off a short pier. We found his car parked close to the bay and his body washed up on the beach a day later."

"Jeez, Scott. I never knew. I'm really sorry to hear all that," said Cyrus.

"That must have been a terrible time for you," said Steph.

Scott waved a dismissive hand. "Yeah, it was. But I learned to move on—sort of." He sat up and leaned in again. "You see, my name was now toxic. I had to drop out of college and no one would give me a second look. No one wanted to be associated with the McNabb name. In the end, I decided to leave Earth and head out to the Belt. I took a job working on freighters, hauling ore from one rock to another. I worked my way up to commander and then... well, let's just say certain people decided that I was now responsible for some of my father's legal debts."

"That's sick. Out here?" said Cyrus.

"Is that true? I never thought they could do that." Miranda was visibly shocked. Scott was now revealing more of the story than any of them knew.

"Who knows if it's legal? Dyrell doesn't care. They hired some low-life collection agency, and they have... let's just say, a more personal approach to getting their money back."

"So that's why you're here. You're running away." Miranda had a knack for never missing an opportunity to stick the knife in.

"That's not very fair." Steph was quick to call her out.

"It's okay. Miranda's right." Scott waved a hand again. "Rick knew of my trouble and gave me a heads-up on this gig. Five years out in the Belt, far away from anyone, sounded like a good idea at the time. So, I signed up and, well... here I am."

No one spoke for a beat as they all digested Scott's story. Finally, Steph broke the silence. "So, what about your mother and the rest of your family? Are they being chased down too?"

Scott slowly shook his head as he lowered his gaze to the floor. "They're all dead. Died when the west coast got nuked, back at the beginning of the rim war."

"Jeez, Scott. You seem to have nothing but bad luck." Cyrus was getting emotional.

"Yeah. The irony of it all, if you could call it that, is that Dyrell's main development lab also got vaporized in that first strike. All their research facilities, their QI, everything was snuffed out. I would laugh if it weren't so tragic. You see, in a way it was all for nothing: the legal cases, the destruction of my father, the patents. In the end, it all went up in a mushroom cloud—except for the alleged debt. They still came after me for that."

The crew receded into their collective thoughts, almost like they were afraid to ask any more of Scott in case the story would plumb new depths of misfortune and tragedy. Instead, they all sat together in silence. It was a moment of camaraderie that Scott had not experienced before. For all the crap he'd been through, there was comfort in this moment. He reckoned they had always viewed him as a bit of a slacker with a total disregard for authority or command. But now, at least, they knew the reason why.

After a while, Miranda stood up and started to move around. "So, if the derelict ship was chartered by Dyrell Labs, then it stands to reason that the quantum device is also theirs."

"Yes," answered Aria, "it was transported from Earth shortly before the rim war started, from their main research facility on the west coast."

"So, they reckoned something was going to happen, and started

moving the silverware into the bunker," said Rick.

"In a sense. But, the threat of war was very high at the time. Everybody was on the move," said Aria.

"Hey, wouldn't it be even more ironic, Scott, if that device turned out to be something developed by your father?" said Cyrus.

Scott gave a kind of half laugh, half snort. "Ha... yeah, well, it doesn't matter now anyway. It's gone. Long gone."

"Bastards." Miranda swiveled around to the others, waving her arm in the general direction of the main screen where they'd all witnessed the assailants take off with the device. "Legally that cargo is ours. Under the Outer Space Treaty, we have claimed salvage. They can't simply take it and expect to get away with it."

"Well they can, and they have." Scott stood up. "We're irrelevant. We're the little guys. Nobody is going to give a shit about us—or our legal claims. Just forget it. It's over. It's gone, and there's no way to get it back even if we wanted to. So just face up to the reality, Miranda. It's a million miles away by now and could be anywhere, and there is absolutely no way we could ever track them down."

Again, there was a moment's silence as the truth of Scott's outburst began to sink in.

"Eh... that's not exactly true." All eyes turned toward the chief engineer.

"What do you mean, not exactly true?" said Scott.

"Because I hid a locator beacon inside the keypad and activated it before we shoved it out the airlock."

"How the hell did you get time to do all that?" said Miranda.

"I did it a while back. I thought it might be a good idea to put a tracker on it, you know, in case something happened and we needed to find it again."

Miranda moved over and gave him a big hug. "Cyrus, you're a goddamn genius."

"Don't get too excited—it doesn't have a very long range. We need to be within ten kilometers, straight line, to pick it up again."

"Aria, is it possible for you to extrapolate probable destinations for the attackers' vessel based on the direction it took?" said Miranda.

"It's possible, but with little accuracy, and the range of potential destinations would be significant."

"Whoa, just wait a minute." Scott was up on his feet again,

gesticulating at Miranda. "This is nuts. Think about what you're saying."

The crew all stopped for a moment and began to exchange conspiratorial looks.

"Yeah, what are we saying?" said Rick.

"We go after them. We get it back," said Miranda.

"Okay, well, let's think about that for a moment, shall we?" Scott turned around so he could take in the faces of the crew. "Number one," he extended an index finger, "we may have a tracking beacon on it, but from what you're saying, Cyrus, we would need to be sitting virtually on top of it to get a blip. Secondly, we might know where they're headed, but as Aria pointed out, these... pirates could be anywhere. It would be like looking for a diamond in a desert." He extended a third finger. "Next, even if with some gargantuan stretch of the imagination we do manage to find them, we're dealing with some serious dudes here. They put a very large hole in our ship just because they got impatient. And lastly, we would be doing this in direct violation of orders from HQ who, presumably, will now instruct us to return to Ceres. At best, we would lose our bonus. At worst, assuming we don't all get killed, we would forfeit all our pay and become criminals since we would technically be stealing their spaceship."

This sobered them all up. When the reality of what they were contemplating was laid out before them, they began to realize how much of a fool's errand it was.

"Don't you want to get it back? I mean, think of the money," said Miranda.

"Yeah, I sure as hell could do with it," said Rick.

Scott shook his head. "If I thought there was a reasonable possibility of achieving that, I could be persuaded. But this is crazy."

"I'm with Scott on this. We've too much to lose with little chance of success," said Steph.

"Come on, don't you see? This is still ours—all we have to do is get it back. Are you all just going to throw away the opportunity to be... free of worry for the rest of your lives?" Miranda was not letting go.

"I say we should go for it. What the heck," said Cyrus.

"You can't keep running away, Scott. Sometimes you have to stand up and fight for what's yours." There was a hint of frustration in the flight officer's voice.

Scott spun around to face Miranda. "Like my father, eh? He fought the good fight, and look where it got him. A world full of debt and a body full of seawater."

"I... I didn't mean it that way. I meant... seize the opportunity."

"Yeah, you did." Scott raised his hands in the air in exasperation. "You all think you know me, you all think I'm just some slacker running away from everything, looking for the easy way out. Well screw it, maybe I am. But I'm still alive, and my family is dead." He turned to face Miranda again and pointed a finger at her. "You don't know me. You don't know anything about me. If you want the real truth of how I feel, well, the way I see it is Dyrell owes me big time, to the point where I want to crush them, to annihilate all trace of them from the system. So, for me, it wouldn't be about the money anymore. It would simply be about extracting revenge." He paused to look at them all. "Do you really want to be part of that?"

No one answered.

"But you're right about one thing." Scott's voice was softer now. "I have been running away, but not from what you think. I've been running from myself, from fear of what I would do if I chose to take my revenge. So maybe you're right, Miranda. Maybe it's time for me to stop running. But then again, I need to ask myself: do I really want to drag all my friends into this?" He opened his arms out to them as he said it.

The crew stood mute in the face of this revelation. The dark underbelly of their commander had been glimpsed, a veil pulled back to display the hidden malice bubbling beneath. No one knew quite how to react.

In the end, it was Aria who spoke. "If I may, Commander, I have plotted some vector probabilities for the departing craft and have established three possible destinations. Would you like to see them?"

There was a silence as the face-off between Scott and the crew continued. Finally, the commander broke off. "Okay, what the heck. Put it up on the holo-table."

With that, a 3D rendering of the solar system radiated out, showing the central planets including orbits and current positions. It extended as far as Earth on one side with Jupiter on the other. It also displayed a detailed rendering of the vast debris field between Mars and Jupiter known as the asteroid belt.

"This was our position when the attack occurred," said Aria. "I

have tracked the departure trajectory of the pirate vessel as far as our scanners allow. Bear in mind that in the general scheme of things, this is not very far, so what you see here is a best guess. Nevertheless, assuming they remain on that trajectory and do not deviate, then this will be their track through the solar system."

The projection started to move, scribing a thin line depicting the path of the departing craft as it traveled through the central band of the Belt. "According to my calculations, they will exit the Belt at this point and traverse open space to reenter the Belt here." The solar system map played out Aria's words.

"From this, it looks like they are heading for Ceres." Cyrus tapped a few icons on the holo-table to zoom in on the dwarf planet.

"Not necessarily," said Aria. "It is a possibility, but not the only one. This same trajectory will bring them close to Vesta and its satellite populations centers. However, it is possible that they may be heading here." The animation rewound until the craft looked to be back in open space, then it zoomed in and a tiny asteroid began to render itself in close proximity to the track of the spacecraft.

"Neo City," said Scott. "Now, why does that not surprise me?" He turned to the crew as he pointed at the dot hovering in space. "I would put money on this being where they're going. Where better in the Belt to offload an illegal cargo than this place?"

"So, what are we saying, then?" said Rick.

"I say we should pay it a visit." Miranda looked from one to the other for confirmation.

"How? We're probably going straight back to Ceres," said Cyrus.

There was a moment before Scott realized they were all looking at him.

"Well... we'll pass close by Neo City on the way. And since our ship is all beat up, it wouldn't surprise anyone if it developed some technical problem that needed to be looked at. And if that problem only came to our attention while we were close to the asteroid..." Scott gave a shrug, "then the sensible option would be to stop off there and get it checked out."

"You think HQ would buy that?" said Cyrus.

"I don't see why not? The worst-case scenario is they reckon we're just stopping off to let our hair down after three years in the wilderness. Hardly a crime."

"Let's do it." Miranda stood with her hands on her hips.

Scott raised a hand. "Back up a step, Miranda. Firstly, we all have to agree to it. Secondly, we go there just to take a look, nothing more."

"I'm in," said Cyrus.

Scott turned to Rick, who nodded back. "Okay with me."

"Steph?"

She hesitated for a beat. "We just go to have a look around, that's all."

"That's all, and maybe grab a beer. I hear they have some good watering holes there," said Scott.

"That's settled, then," said Miranda.

"Not quite," said Scott. "Aria, what do you think?"

"Since my primary purpose is to ensure the welfare of the crew, I think that a period of rest and recuperation would be of enormous benefit to all."

"What about the Hermes developing a fictitious technical problem?"

"We don't have to invent something—there's plenty wrong with this ship already."

Scott turned back to the crew. "All right, then. Looks like we're going to Neo City."

NEO CITY ASTEROID

Neo was one of those rocks that didn't follow the rules. Some time back in its ancient history, it was ejected from the central asteroid belt and adopted a bizarre elliptical orbit that bisected the solar system. It was classed as a near-earth object (NEO), from which it got its current name. Every so often in its orbit, it would also come close to Mars and, at its furthest point, near Ceres. So, over its four-year orbital period, Neo came within spitting distance of the primary population centers in the solar system. Only the moons of Jupiter were beyond its reach.

It was a small, potato-shaped rock, only three kilometers in diameter at its narrowest and not quite five kilometers long. But it just happened to be a Type-C, meaning it was blessed with an abundance of useful resources such as water ice, which could be filtered and purified for drinking and horticulture, as well as converted into oxygen for life support and hydrogen for propellant. It also contained copious metals for construction and a plethora of carbon compounds for the manufacture of a vast range of materials, from plastics to methane. This cornucopia of resources, coupled with its periodic proximity to Earth, made it one of the first asteroids to be mined, well over a century ago.

But a lot had changed since then. The Xiang Zu Corporation, who effectively owned it, embarked on an audacious engineering project to transform it from a barren, lifeless rock into a thriving hub of civilization. They did it by excavating a giant hole centered on its longest axis, half a kilometer wide and one-and-a-half deep. Then they built a massive airlock at one end, filled the cavern with an atmosphere, and finally, after strapping an enormous bracelet of engines to the outside, spun it up to provide a one-gee environment along the inner surface of its core.

Over the intervening decades, the space inside had grown to more than twice the original. It was now at least a kilometer in diameter, and three deep, with a populace of over twenty-five thousand. It was now part asteroid, part city, and part spacecraft.

Also, over this time, it slowly trimmed its orbit to maximize its transit times with the other major centers of human activity in the system. And like the ancient caravans that traded between societies all along the Silk Road in centuries past, Neo plied a new road, one that took it around the solar system every four years.

This eccentricity of orbit allowed Neo City, as it became known, a considerable level of autonomy. It was beholden to no one but itself. It remained stubbornly independent from the main system power blocks of Earth, Mars, the Belt, and the academic institutions of Europa. It did not involve itself in politics; it took no sides and shunned all entreaties to engage in interplanetary dialog. This gave it the aura of a rogue state. Many deemed it a lawless, hedonistic bastion of radicals, misfits, pirates, criminals, dubious corporations, and a lot of dirty money. It was said that anything you wanted you could get in Neo City—for a price. They only had one law: everything is negotiable.

So, it came as no great surprise to Scott that this would be the ideal place to off-load some exotic tech that you had just stolen from a bunch of losers on the far side of the Belt. But he really wondered if it would still be there by the time they got to the asteroid city—if it was ever there to begin with.

They were days behind the attackers' craft. By the time the crew of the *Hermes* got to Neo, the device might have been bought and sold six times and by now be halfway across the solar system. Scott didn't hold out much hope of finding it. Nevertheless, he kept his feelings to himself, mainly because, for the first time in the entire three years this crew had been together, they had started to feel like a team—actually, more than that: they felt to Scott like family, and he liked that feeling. Sharing his opinions would just erode the hope that they all felt. Hope was what kept them going, now that the mission was effectively over. But deep down, he knew they knew that, too. So, for the last ten days, as they hurtled through space toward Neo City, no one was going to be the first to break the spell.

Ceres HQ, as assumed, had ordered the mission over and requested them to return. Aria subsequently informed HQ of a series of technical issues that had developed during the return trip, and that they were concerned these glitches might be indicative of a more serious problem. So, they were planning to stop off at the asteroid city, to enable a thorough assessment of the structural

integrity of the ship before venturing on to Ceres. This request was met with surprisingly little resistance or enquiry. As Scott had guessed, it might be HQ's way of allowing them all to let their hair down after three years in isolation. This was another thing that worried Scott: his social skills weren't exactly sparkling before he left on this mission. By now, they must be nonexistent. But, in a way, that was the great thing about Neo City: no one gave a crap.



* * *

Scott looked up at the primary monitor in operations. From edge to edge, it was filled with the blackness of space sprinkled with a light dusting of stars. Dominating the center of this celestial tableau was a dark gray blob, its features indistinct and blurry at this distance out. Nonetheless, they could just make out the gigantic spaceship dock on the ass end of Neo City. Another day and they would be there. Scott glanced over at his chief engineer. "Anything?"

Cyrus had been virtually glued to the comms console for the last few hours. He had been listening intently to an earpiece pressed hard against his head. So much so that Scott wondered if it would penetrate the chief engineer's cranial cavity and become part of his biology. He wore a look of intense concentration, glanced back at Scott, and shook his head. "If it's inside that rock, then we need to be very close to get a signal."

Scott shrugged and looked back at the fuzzy image of the asteroid on screen. "Aria, can you display the latest hyperspectral scan?"

"Certainly, Commander."

A confusion of colors now bloomed across the screen. Scott tapped a few icons on his console and adjusted the spectral map to make it easier for the human visual processing center in the brain to make sense of what it was seeing.

The Hermes, being a survey vessel, was equipped with some very specialized scanners used to probe bodies deep within the Belt. It told them more about the asteroid city of Neo than they probably knew themselves. But Scott was not interested in the geophysical makeup of the body. What he was using it for was to find out what ships were there, and he could do this based on the metallic signatures acquired by the scanner.

So far, Aria was able to identify thirty-seven different craft, either docked to the asteroid or parked around it. Of these, five were of similar size, shape, and metallic content to the pirate craft that had attacked them and taken the quantum device. None was a perfect match—although that didn't mean it wasn't there. It might be docked behind some other craft and, therefore, obscured from their scanners. The only way to know for sure was to rendezvous and take a closer look.

They would park the Hermes in a stationary orbit close to the asteroid and then take one of their two small transports over to Neo City. The only problem was that the transport only took four, so someone was going to be disappointed. Scott wasn't quite sure how he was going to square that circle, since after three years out at the edge of the Belt, everyone was gagging for some shore leave. The solution to this minor problem presented itself as the Hermes maneuvered in close to the asteroid. Cyrus and Miranda were in the hangar prepping the transport while the rest of them were on the bridge, overseeing the positioning of the Hermes at the coordinates that flight control on Neo City had given them. Aria was doing most of the heavy lifting; it was a delicate operation best suited to the QI.

In the middle of all this, Rick announced to Scott that he would stay behind. "Someone's gotta stay here, buddy."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. Too much temptation on that rock. I would just head for the nearest bar and wouldn't leave till I either passed out, or I died," said the old miner.

Scott laughed.

"It's best I wait till we get to Ceres. At least there I can get better medical support."

"Okay," said Scott as he rose from his seat and signaled to Steph. "Come on, time to go."

They left the old miner to keep an eye on the ship as they made their way down one of the four central spokes of the torus to the

hangar at the bow of the spaceship. As they progressed, the artificial gravity created by the centripetal force lessened until they became weightless. They wasted no time getting suited up and climbing into the small lander parked inside the hangar.

As usual, Miranda was sitting in the pilot's seat, running through pre-flight checks. "Okay, everyone ready?" She really didn't need to ask; a chorus of "ready" echoed around the cockpit. With that, the hangar bay doors opened and the landing platform began to extend outward, bringing the craft with it. Once clear of the hangar, Miranda took it slow, rising the craft gently from its platform, then arcing it away from the Hermes toward Neo City.

On the cockpit monitor, Scott saw the huge rotating asteroid city come into view and grow in size as they approached, its gnarled rocky surface dotted with carbuncles of technology: antennae, engines, navigation systems, even the odd plasma cannon. It was like some great technological disease had afflicted the asteroid and was now bursting out from inside.

Scott was mesmerized by the slow, graceful spin of Neo City. It had a strange, hypnotic beauty to it. But then again, maybe it was just the three years in isolation that made it so alluring. It was the first oasis of civilization that they had seen in all that time. No one spoke, all lost in the same trance that Scott was now feeling so intensely.

The flight path they were on took them along the topside of the asteroid to the dock that trailed out from the stern. This was where visiting ships could find a safe harbor without having to negotiate the difficult maneuver of matching its spin. It was by far the most visually impressive aspect of the entire structure.

A two-hundred-meter-wide circular bearing had been engineered into the stern of the asteroid, and from its face, a long, flat steel dock extended out almost half a kilometer. It made the asteroid look like a giant popsicle spinning through space. Long gantries spread out from either side of this dock. These were for the bigger transport ships where umbilicals would directly connect to the ship's airlock. This allowed people and goods to be transported in and out of Neo City in a full one atmosphere. Every available space seemed to be packed with ships of all shapes and sizes, some commercial transports, some corporate vehicles, and quite a few luxury craft.

All these vessels moored along the gantries were ships that were

built in space, for space. They could not land on a planet or enter a gravity well of any kind, unlike the little lander that Miranda piloted, which was now heading for the upper deck of the long dock. This section was an enormous flat surface designed to accommodate such landers. They could see at least a couple dozen already anchored along its length. These were mostly shuttles from the ships, like the Hermes, that were too big to dock and so had to take up a stationary position further out from the asteroid.

"Wow," said Steph, "it's seriously busy. Never seen so many craft packed together in one place."

"Yeah, Neo City is close to the Belt at this point in its orbit, so there are a huge number of ships venturing out here for business and... whatever else goes on in a place like this," said Cyrus.

The cockpit monitor started to flash alerts as flight control on Neo City contacted their lander and sent directives on where to go.

"Over there." Miranda pointed out an area on the platform where lights strobed outward in concentric circles. "That's us. That's our spot." She banked the craft gently to position it over the center of the flashing beacon.

Scott looked over at Cyrus. "You pick up anything yet?"

The chief engineer seemed to be fiddling with something on the side of his visor. He pursed his lips and shook his head. "Nada, not a damn thing."

"I've spotted at least three ships that look very like the one that attacked us," said Steph.

"It's a standard Excelsior class transport ship. There are probably hundreds of them in the system. They all look the same. I should know—I worked on them for years," said Cyrus.

By now, Miranda had taken them directly over the landing spot and, on the monitor, they could see the concentric flashing lights growing larger and larger as she brought them down. Powerful electromagnets on the pad switched on to grab the landing gear, attaching it firmly so that it would not bounce off in zero-gee. Mechanical clamps then extended from the platform to lock the lander in place. More alerts flashed up to inform them that they had been securely attached.

"Welcome to Neo City," a disembodied voice echoed around the cockpit, startling the crew. "Your craft is now secure. Please wait until umbilical is attached and integrity confirmed before attempting to disembark."

Outside on the landing pad, a hatch silently opened and a gantry rose up from within. Already, the central system on Neo City had identified the type of craft and had configured the most appropriate apparatus to connect with the little lander and effect an airtight seal around its hatch. Inside, Scott felt a low vibration permeate the craft as motors and gears worked to attach the umbilical. There was a thump, and the craft rocked a little.

"Umbilical connected. A one atmosphere environment has been attained with your vessel. Please ensure that you understand the Neo City bylaws before disembarkation. Be aware that failure to abide by these laws may result in substantial fines or impounding of your vessel or both. More serious offenses will result in incarceration for a period commensurate with the crime. Please enjoy your visit."

"They don't mess around, do they?" said Steph.

"It's all bullshit. I've been here before, and believe me: they turn a blind eye to pretty much everything bar physical violence, and even that would need to be extreme before they would give it any attention," said Miranda.

Cyrus raised a hand. "Quiet!" His other hand fiddled with his visor. He was listening to something. Cyrus slowly turned his head around to face the crew and a smile cracked across his lips. "I found it."

"Shit, really?" said Miranda.

Questions started flying back at the engineer. Everyone was getting excited, talking in whispers.

"Are you sure? Where is it?" said Scott.

Cyrus extended an arm and moved slowly around, all the time focusing on something only he could see and hear. "There. It's in that direction, pretty close, perhaps a hundred meters or so."

"Miranda, can you pan the exterior camera around the dock?" said Scott.

She quickly tapped a few icons on her console. The monitor flickered and a view over the dock started to materialize. She panned it to where Cyrus was vaguely pointing. Their location on the upper platform of the landing dock only afforded them a partial view of the big ships moored below. It also didn't help that other landers parked around them obscured a good deal of the vista.

"There, that's it. That's an Excelsior class transport." Miranda zoomed in on the section of a ship that was visible to them. A ripple

of excitement tinged with fear reverberated through Scott's body. He sensed the same reaction in the rest of the crew as they all gathered around the monitor, staring in silence at this temptation. Things could start to get tricky from here on in. The desire to try to regain possession of the quantum device would now start to tug at them, luring them with its promise of a new life, pushing them to make choices that could entangle them all in a high-stakes game of chance.

"Okay, let's not get too excited," he said finally. "Let's just keep it cool, maybe do a bit of snooping if we get the opportunity. Nobody go and do anything stupid, okay?"

To Scott's surprise they all nodded in agreement. It was rare that he ever got that much consensus from the crew so quickly. But this was a delicate situation. Their hunch might have been right: they had found the quantum device. But they were still a very, very long way from getting it back.

They all jumped as the comms burst out with another automated message from flight control. "Awaiting disembarkation. Please confirm that you are departing your craft imminently."

Cyrus shook his head. "Jeez, that scared the crap out of me."

"Okay, I say we all go find a nice bar where we can have a few cold beers and collect our thoughts. Agreed?" said Scott.

They all nodded again. This was the second time in as many minutes that Scott had consensus. He could get to like this.

"We'd better leave the EVA suits here. Not going to need them now." Miranda started extracting herself from the bulky suit. The others followed her lead.

However, Scott was uncomfortable with this. "That reduces our options. It means we can't EVA."

"Yeah, I know what it means, Scott. But it's a full one-gee inside the inner rim of Neo City. These suits will weigh us down considerably."

"As well as look a bit suspicious, don't you think?" Steph piped in.

"Okay, I take your point." Scott wasn't getting it all his own way, after all. He'd just have to be satisfied with two out of three.

A few minutes later, they were floating through the umbilical, down into the lower section of the dock. Here, they came to an airlock that allowed them access to the main thoroughfare along the spine of the port and into the city proper. An automated voice

requested them to present their faces one at a time to a small flat screen for scanning and identification. Only when the final scan was complete did the door open to allow them in. As they waited for the inner door to open, Scott wondered what the next move should be, apart from a cold beer—or two.

But the decision was made for him when it snapped open, and four well-armed guards floated in the space before them. They all sported the insignia of the Xiang Zu Corporation, the owners of Neo City. In front of the guards stood a thin, middle-aged official. She held a slate terminal in one hand and was checking something on it when the door opened. She seemed to be glued to the floor, similar to two of the other guards. They all wore magnetic boots that enabled them to attach to any ferrous surface. Scott had reoriented himself, so he was not upside down relative to her position.

"Good afternoon and welcome to Neo City. I am Li Chan." Her voice was chirpy, almost childlike. "Are you the crew of the Hermes?"

Scott wondered why she was asking this, as it would seem pretty obvious they were. "Yes," he replied. "I'm Commander Scott McNabb."

"Excellent," chirped the official. "Please follow me." She released her mag grip, floated up slightly, and turned to head off.

"Eh, what's this about?" said Miranda, hesitating.

She waved a hand over her shoulder: "Come on. Someone wants to have a little chat with you all."

"What about?" said Scott.

With that, Li Chan reactivated her mag boots, reattached herself to the floor, and strode over with precise and efficient movements. She brought herself up close to Scott, her voice dropped a few octaves, and her face lost all its fake charm. "This isn't a request, and I don't have all day, so let's get going." She disengaged the boots a second time and floated off. One of the guards moved in closer to the crew and jerked his head. "This way. Chop, chop."

As Scott floated along after the official, thoughts of a nice, cold beer began to fade away.

EINSTEIN, PODOLSKY, ROSEN

The reception committee from Neo City's law and order department shepherded the crew along a corridor and onto a broad, busy thoroughfare. This was the backbone of the dock and was thronged with people and goods moving up and down. No one paid them any attention. Li Chen tapped something on her slate and a few seconds later, two small streetcars came into view and stopped in front of them. They were low and open with six seats in each. Emblazoned on each side was an official-looking Neo City insignia. Scott and Miranda were bundled into one along with Li Chen and two of the guards. Steph and Cyrus were put into the other with two more guards. They were carefully strapped in and, as if that wasn't enough, a safety bar swiveled down to clamp them in place.

Scott ventured a crack. "Are we going on a roller coaster ride? Do we get any cotton candy?"

The guard checking the safety harness looked up and smiled. "Sort of. Don't know if it has a sweet ending though?"

When the guard finally took his seat, Scott and Miranda exchanged a look—a WTF-is-going-on kind of look.

The cars started off, slowly at first, but gently building up speed as they moved. After a few moments, they entered a large open concourse. It had the feel of a busy port terminal, with hundreds of people moving and floating in the zero-gee environment. The cars came to a halt and Scott wondered what all the safety harness gear was for, since the trip here was hardly an adrenaline rush. The car juddered as clamps rose out from the floor and gripped it tight. It rotated a full ninety degrees, then started to descend.

Scott glanced over at Miranda again and pointed downward. "I think we're heading for the rim."

Miranda simply nodded, but her face revealed her to be on high alert, eyes darting this way and that.

The car picked up a considerable amount of speed as it descended—or was it ascending? It was hard to determine in space. Either way, it was moving ever outward to the surface of the

internal rim of the asteroid city. Scott could feel several forces acting on his body: the downward momentum, like a fast falling lift; the centripetal spin, making his body feel heavier. The car finally stopped and the safety bars automatically rose. He was temporarily disorientated while his brain tried to make sense of all the momentum that had been acting on his body; it was having difficulty deciding which way was up and which way was down.

He undid the harness and stood up; he was a bit shaky. Miranda was also feeling the disorientation. Scott looked over at the other car. Cyrus was standing beside it, throwing up while one of the guards slapped him on the back, laughing. "It's a bitch the first few times, ha-ha."

Steph, by contrast, didn't seem to have any problems adapting to the new normal.

"This way," Li beckoned them to follow as they moved into what looked like an administration sector, remarkable in the fact that it was unremarkable. It was like every other office area Scott had ever been in. He mused that they all must be made in the same factory, from the same mold. They walked through a maze of corridors until they were finally ushered into a long narrow boardroom.

"You can wait in here. The others will be along shortly," said Li Chen.

Scott could see that Miranda was about to protest but thought better of it. Li Chen turned and pointed a sharp finger at Scott. "And do me a favor: don't do anything stupid." With that, she went, taking the guards with her.

"What the hell is all this about?" Miranda whispered to Scott.

He shrugged. "No idea. But I wouldn't read too much into it."

"I don't like it, not one bit," said Steph.

"Hey, you guys really need to check this out." Cyrus was over by a long window that took up most of one wall. He beckoned to them with an arm. As Scott moved over, he began to see what had so amazed the engineer. The room they were in was high up on the stern of the asteroid, affording them a view into the vast, cavernous interior space of Neo City. It stretched out before them, gently sloping upward on both sides, coming full circle directly above. The surface was a confusing patchwork of buildings, parks, roads, and machines, all glued together by an endless stream of citizens living and working in the great city. High up along the central axis, a huge, fat rod of diffused light illuminated every section of the

metropolis. The central space between this giant light source and the city floor below was filled with odd-looking flying machines. The place was abuzz with activity.

"Wow," said Steph, "that's incredible."

The door opened and two men entered, one younger and official looking, one older and more casual.

"Please," the younger man gestured, "take a seat. I'm Hao Maozhen, and this is my associate Su Haidong." A third person then entered the room, a woman, middle-aged, carrying a glass of water. She took a seat against the back wall of the room, placed the glass on a small table, and said nothing. The other two men sat down opposite the crew.

Hao tapped on a slate he was carrying. "So... you're the crew of the Hermes?"

Scott shrugged. "And you are?"

Hao gestured to his colleague. "We represent the interests of the Xiang Zu Corporation here on Neo City. We just want to ask you a few questions, that's all." He smiled again. "No big deal."

"So..." he continued, "you guys found the wreck of the Bao Zheng, out at..." he checked his slate screen, "Antiope Nine Zero?"

"Yeah," said Scott.

"And... you recovered an item of cargo?"

"As is our right under the Outer Space Treaty, salvage act 3429. We're due compensation for that," Miranda blurted out.

"Indeed." Hao raised a hand. "So... where is it now?"

"Where is what now?" Scott was not going to make it easy for them.

The other man, Su, answered. "The EPR Device. The one that Dyrell Labs was trying to hide. We know you had it, so where is it now?"

"Who knows," said Scott. "We were attacked by pirates; they stole it."

"We're still entitled to the salvage compensation," Miranda added.

The two men looked at each other for a moment. "But you did have it?"

"Sorry," said Scott, leaning back in his seat, "but what's all this about?"

"The EPR device—what else?" said Hao.

"What's the big deal with this thing, anyway?" said Steph.

"Everyone seems so darned interested in it."

The two men laughed. "Interested?" said Hao. Scott could see even the enigmatic third person sitting by the wall was also smiling. Hao now sat back and opened his hand in a gesture. "You have no idea what you found, do you?"

"Some sort of quantum device," said Cyrus.

The two men went quiet for a moment as Hao looked over at the woman sitting by the far wall. She glanced at the crew, then back at Hao, giving him a very slight nod.

He finally turned around to look at the crew again, put his arms on the table, and leaned in. "You are correct in describing it as a quantum device, but it is also quite possibly the most significant technological artifact in existence in the solar system." He sat back again to let this sink in. "The news of your discovery of the Bao Zheng has spread like wildfire around the system. We know you had it in your possession, so we are simply trying to ascertain where it might be now."

Scott sighed, "Listen, Hao, we don't know. We were attacked by pirates and the... EPR device, as you call it, was stolen. In case you haven't noticed, there's a large bite taken out of our ship."

"What does 'EPR' mean?" asked Steph.

Hao took his arms off the table and sat back, looking at the crew for a moment, a little exasperated. There was a pause in the conversation before Su finally responded. "Einstein, Podolsky, Rosen."

"As in the EPR paradox?" said Cyrus.

"Exactly," said Su, stabbing an index finger at the engineer.

"What the heck is that?" said Miranda.

Cyrus started to explain as best he could: "It's a thought experiment cooked up by Einstein and his buddies, intended to demonstrate the inherent paradox in quantum mechanics. At the time, the understanding of the quantum world was defined by what is known as the Copenhagen Interpretation. One of the areas within this interpretation, that Einstein had great difficulty with, was entanglement. This is where two quantum particles are intertwined." He clasped the fingers of both hands together into a ball to give them a visual clue. "They both operate as a pair." He separated his hands, clumped them into fists and wobbled them about. "What one does will affect the other. But the problems come when you try to figure out what state they are in. If you take

only one particle of this pair," Cyrus took away one of his hands, leaving one fist in front of him, "you have no idea what it's doing. Is it spinning up, down, this way, that way?" He wobbled his fist again. "It is said to be in all possible states at the same time, weird as that may sound. However, when you finally look at it, it suddenly jumps to one state."

Miranda shook her head. "I don't get it."

Cyrus sighed and took his hand down.

"Schrödinger's cat," said Su from across the table.

Scott noticed that the mood in the room was more relaxed, now that the conversation had turned into more of a science discussion. Hopefully, they could get the hell out of here soon, but he wasn't leaving until he got some understanding of what the big deal was with this EPR device.

"It's another thought experiment," Su continued, "to explain the inherent weirdness of a particle having multiple states. You put a live cat into a box along with some poisonous gas that's only released at random intervals. When you close the box and look at it, you don't know if the gas has been released or not, so you don't know if the cat is alive or dead. Therefore, you could say it's both alive and dead at the same time. In other words, suspended in two states. It only becomes one or the other when you open the box again and look at it."

Cyrus was nodding. "Exactly."

"Poor cat," said Steph.

Miranda had a studied expression on her face now—she had begun to get it.

Cyrus held up a closed fist again. "So, when you look at one of your entangled particles... let's say it's in this position." Cyrus rotated his fist around forty-five degrees. "Since the sum of the two particle states must equal zero, you now know the state of the second one." He raised his other fist and rotated it in the opposite direction. "By looking at this one," he shook a fist, "you have forced it to adopt a fixed state. By extension, you have also forced this other one into an equal and opposite state." He wobbled the other fist. "Get it?"

"Sort of," said Miranda. "But what's all this got to do with the EPR thing?"

"I'm getting to that," said Cyrus. "The problem that Einstein had was that these two entangled particles could be separated by

enormous distances and, therefore, an instantaneous change of state in both particles at the same time would infer faster-than-light communication. This would conflict with his theory of relativity. Hence the paradox."

All the lights came on in Scott's head at once. He felt dizzy with this sudden revelation of what the device actually was. He looked over at the two men sitting across from them. They sensed he was getting it; a vague hint of a smile began to form on their faces.

"Oh my god." Scott finally managed to speak. "It's a faster than light communications device." He looked wide-eyed at Hao and Su.

Their faces cracked into wide broad smiles, bordering on laughter. Su slapped the table and pointed a lazy finger at him. "You got it."

"That's impossible. It completely defies the laws of physics. It can't be." Cyrus was looking from Scott and back to Hao and Su.

"I'll admit we were skeptical, too. But I have seen the Dyrell data: it really does work," said Su.

Cyrus shook his head.

"So now it makes sense," said Scott. "That's why everyone wants it. It's the only one in the solar system."

"Precisely," said Su.

"And you want it too, don't you?"

Hao shrugged, "Of course. But like your engineer here," he pointed at Cyrus, "I'm a bit skeptical. Nevertheless, if it is a superluminal communications device then... we're looking at a significant rebalancing of power in the system. We wouldn't like to see it fall into the wrong hands now, would we?"

"By the wrong hands, you mean anyone but Neo City?" said Steph.

"Correct. So why don't you do us all a favor and tell us where you think it is?"

Scott shrugged. "It could be anywhere by now. Your guess is as good as ours."

Hao sat back in his seat with an exasperated sigh. "Look, we can do this the easy way or the hard way. But I would suggest that you guys start cooperating, and fast. My patience is wearing thin."

"Like I said, it was stolen." Scott shrugged.

Hao gave another sigh. "So why are you here?"

"We're here for the beer. Remember, we've just spent three years out in the asteroid belt. Time to let our hair down," said Miranda.

"Bullshit," said Su. "You're here because you think the device was brought here, somewhere in Neo City. Isn't that right?"

Scott shook his head. "You're chasing ghosts. We don't know anything."

"So you keep saying." Hao was checking something on his slate. "So, what can you tell us about this ship that attacked you?"

"Go and talk to HQ on Ceres. They have a report on the incident."

Hao leaned in. "Don't get smart. Like I said, we can do this the hard way if you prefer."

Miranda countered by leaning across the table at him. "Why don't you just go and screw yourself?"

Scott raised a hand. "Hey... let's just try to get along here. We simply don't know where it is, and obviously we can't go giving you confidential information since HQ on Ceres would be pretty pissed off with us for doing that. We're trying to do our job and get paid, that's all. So why don't we just run along, and you guys can get back to whatever it is you do. Sorry we can't help you." He opened his hands in a conciliatory gesture.

Hao and Su sat back and smiled. At the same time, Scott noticed that the woman now brought a cupped hand over her earpiece and seemed to be listening to a message. She stood up, moved over to Hao, and whispered something in his ear. He looked back at her in surprise. She picked up his slate, tapped a few icons, and handed it back to him. He read it, then nodded to her. She left the room, and the mood changed again.

"Okay." He placed both palms on the table and stood up. "The situation has changed. We've just been informed by the Ceres authorities that if you guys show up here, you are to be detained immediately."

"What?! What for?" Scott was now on his feet.

The door opened, and four armed guards entered, taking up positions on either side of the entrance.

Hao picked up his slate and looked at something on it. "Apparently for stealing a spaceship."

"That's bullshit." Miranda was on her feet. Scott could see her sizing up the guards. This was getting crazy.

"Sorry," said Hao. "Looks like we're going to do this the hard way after all." He gave a limp shrug.

A guard stepped forward. "We'll take it from here." The door was

opened again, and the two men were ushered outside.

That's when Miranda made her move. Quite what she hoped to achieve, Scott had no idea. She launched herself across the table like a gazelle and buried a foot in the abdomen of the nearest guard. As he dropped to the floor, she was already pivoting around to strike the next one on the side of the head. Chairs went flying as Steph and Cyrus jumped up and moved back against the wall, out of the way. Scott simply froze. What the hell was she thinking? This was not the answer. But the other two guards were now pulling out pulse weapons, so Scott was left with no choice. "Screw it," he thought, and dove for the guard's gun hand.

Too late.

A burst of incandescent pain hit him square in the chest. His body convulsed violently as every nerve ending he possessed experienced overwhelming electrical overload. Somewhere in the midst of this trauma, he thought he heard a second blast, and a third. He slumped to the floor and passed out.

XIANG ZU

The one-and-a-half kilos of biological matter that constituted Commander Scott McNabb's brain had a hard time dealing with the sudden electrical overload that the plasma blast had inflicted on his body. So, it had simply given up trying and shut itself down—for a while. Now though, it was beginning to test and probe its neural network to establish if any of its multitudinous functions could be brought back online, so to speak. To its relief, it found the initial surge had dissipated entirely so at least now it had something to work with. Slowly but surely, it started to turn up the dials on Scott McNabb's physical systems, bringing its host back up to full consciousness.

Scott opened his eyes to a brilliant white light blazing all around his field of vision. He reflexively squinted and moved an arm over his face to protect his eyes. His body felt heavy, like he was experiencing intense gravity, and his chest hurt like hell. Then he remembered. That crazy bitch, Miranda. What was she thinking, taking on those guys like that? Man, what a mess, he thought.

"Scott... Scott... can you hear me?"

He opened his eyes again, slower this time. A blurry face blocked most of the direct light and was haloed with an equally blurry mop of curly hair.

"Steph?"

"You okay?"

Scott found he was lying flat on his back on a hard, cold floor. "Yeah, I think so." He raised himself up on one elbow. Steph helped him shuffle into a position where he could rest his back against a wall. The light still hurt his eyes, so he kept them shut and his head down. He breathed deep a few times, gathering his strength; the place smelled of chemicals masking a background of foul, stale air. His chest burned with pain as he breathed, but other than that he seemed pretty much intact. After a few more breaths, he risked opening his eyes again.

The room was viciously bright, and he held a hand up to shade

his face. His focus was still blurry, but he managed to make out the form of Steph close beside him, also resting against the wall. "What happened?" Scott found his voice was labored, the pain in his chest making it difficult to talk.

"They locked us up," she replied.

"Took my goddamn eyes too," came another voice from across the room.

Scott swiveled his head to see Cyrus sitting cross-legged on the floor a few meters away. His head was bowed, but as Scott's eyes began to adjust to the light, he saw that the engineer wasn't wearing the visor that had been a permanent feature of his face. In fact, he couldn't remember a time when Cyrus didn't have it on—Scott had always assumed that it was surgically grafted onto his face.

Cyrus raised his head and motioned in Scott's direction. Instead of eyes, he had flaps of skin completely covering his sockets. On either side of his skull, Scott saw the interface ports streaked with congealed blood.

"My god, Cyrus, what did they do?"

"I'm blind, totally blind. They took my eyes. Bastards." Cyrus was inconsolable. Scott shook his head in despair and turned back to Steph. "Where's Miranda?"

She gestured sideways, away from Scott. He bent forward to look around her and saw the unconscious form of the flight officer lying on her back. He slumped back against the wall. "It's a goddamn mess."

"They hit her twice," said Steph. "Once wasn't enough to take her down. She's one tough bird."

"She's crazy," said Scott.

With that, Miranda began to moan and Steph shuffled over to her. "She's coming around."

Scott didn't care. She was a lunatic as far as he was concerned. Now they were all in worse shit because of her.

"Where... are we?" Miranda's voice was weak. Scott ventured another glance over at her. Steph was down on the floor beside her, helping Miranda sit up against the wall.

"Locked up," said Steph, as she gripped her under the arms and helped her sit up.

"See what you did. They took my eyes, took all our gear. You're a nut job. Now we're totally screwed, all because of you." Cyrus was

letting rip with all his anger and frustration.

Miranda coughed and took a few deep breaths. "I'm... sorry," she finally said in a low voice, her head down.

"You're sorry?" Scott felt his anger welling up inside. "Well, that's okay. No problem then." He paused. Miranda said nothing. "What the hell were you trying to achieve?"

Miranda looked back at him. "We would have taken them if you hadn't been so slow to back me up."

"And then what? We simply walk right out and all live happily ever after?"

Miranda looked down again. "I... don't know."

"How in God's name does inflicting grievous bodily harm on a couple of security guards help us? All that crap about Ceres wanting us arrested was simply... bullshit. They were just winding us up, Miranda, trying to get us rattled. Now you've given them everything they need."

"Scott's right," said Steph. "They were just bluffing. HQ back on Ceres will kick up a hell of a stink when they find out."

"You're insane," Cyrus piped in. "Now see where we are."

Miranda raised her head and gave them a cold, hard stare. "How can you all be so naïve? There's no mistake here. They want us out of the way. We have a salvage claim, but if they can concoct some crime on our part, then we lose it."

"Well, you certainly made sure of that," Cyrus replied. "Now I'm completely blind, thanks to you."

Scott felt for the engineer. Here was someone for whom the world was rendered in hyperspectral detail, an enhanced reality far beyond the normal range of vision. Now it had been literally ripped from him. The trauma must be intense.

Miranda was standing up now. "Don't any of you get it? They know we know where it is, and they want it. Ceres has no power here, they can very easily kill us and there's not a damn thing anyone can do about it."

Scott struggled to his feet. "Look, for what it's worth, Miranda, I'm not completely disagreeing with your analysis. At least part of what you say is probably right—they want what we know. But what pisses me off is your tendency toward violence as a first course of action."

"Oh really? Well, Commander, what would you have us do?" She put particular emphasis on the word commander, like it was an

insult.

"Talk, negotiate, get some intel, work the problem, sell them the information, figure a way forward—without beating people to death in the process."

Miranda gave a sigh and sat down again. The room they were incarcerated in was too small for walking around. "We would be in exactly the same situation if I had done nothing. Still locked up in here, hobbled. I was trying to give us some options, maybe make a run for it or hide out somewhere." She looked around at them. "It would have been better than this." She waved a hand.

Scott was beginning to calm down. He put his hand on his aching ribs and gave a long sigh. "Listen, I appreciate you putting your ass on the line for us."

"I sure as hell don't," said Cyrus.

Scott glanced over at the engineer, then back at Miranda. "But the next time, can you give us a heads-up before you start kicking the crap out of people?"

Miranda gave him a resigned shrug. "I'll... try."

Scott sat down again. No one spoke.

The situation was a complete mess, no question. He had been incredibly dumb in thinking they could all just stop off at Neo City for a few beers. Word of the discovery was out, everybody wanted it, and of course that would include the Xiang Zu Corporation that ran Neo. What the hell was he thinking? Too late now. They would have been better off going direct to Ceres. By now, the Hermes would be impounded, so there was no way off this rock. In fact, there was no way out of this situation that Scott could see. Not only had he seen his dreams of a better life disappear when the pirate ship took the salvaged cargo, but his pay and bonus for three years of the most excruciatingly dull work he had ever done was also in jeopardy. He needed something to cling to even if it seemed hopeless. So, he bent his mind to the problem.

The more Scott thought about it, the more it came back to the EPR device, as Hao and Su called it. A faster than light communication system. It blew his mind as the ramifications of this technology percolated in his head. With people and machines expanding ever further out toward the edges of the solar system, communication became more problematic as the distances grew. At the furthest extremes of human civilization within the system, a single message would take hours.

So, this device would cause a paradigm shift in the functioning of human civilization, making whoever owned it incredibly powerful. Not least the fact that they would generate enormous revenues simply by allowing access to others who feared being left behind. It would also be a powerful bargaining chip as fear of losing access could emasculate whole societies. Whoever controlled it would tilt the balance of power in the solar system.

This power currently lay with Earth. But its sphere of influence was already waning as decades of devastating wars coupled with environmental mismanagement had taken its toll. To sustain itself, Earth sucked in resources from the Belt to feed its industries, and without these raw materials, it would deteriorate even further.

The other great power was Mars. It now had a significant population, coupled with an almost utopian society, and it too needed the Belt's resources as it grew and expanded. Its power and influence came from control of the interplanetary trade routes, something neither the Belt nor Earth were very happy about.

As for the Belt itself, it had what everybody else wanted. But it lacked the power structures and social cohesion to make it more than just a great big mine. But that was changing, and fast.

The only part of this system-wide sociopolitical equation that Scott couldn't quite pin down was the academic institutions on Europa. Ever since life was discovered there, it had become essentially untouchable. It was the Switzerland of the solar system, a neutral entity, a seat of learning and research, a place that had elevated itself far above the grubby politics of the rest of the solar system. They aligned themselves with no one and seemed to look down on the rest of the system as if they were all a bunch of ignorant and unruly children. Scott never had much time for their high-minded, condescending view of things.

But was faster-than-light communication really possible? Cyrus seemed pretty adamant that it was impossible. It defied the laws of physics, he had said. Scott's own limited knowledge on the subject also informed his own skepticism. He looked over at the engineer. Cyrus sat on the floor with his back to the wall. There were no seats or furniture in the room of any kind, so sitting or lying on the floor was the only option. Steph was beside him, her arm around his shoulder. She was talking to him very quietly. Scott couldn't make out the conversation. Cyrus had his head bowed and sounded like he was sobbing. How that worked with no eyes, Scott wasn't sure,

but what he was sure about was the engineer had taken his situation very badly. He was a complete mess.

Scott wished there was something he could do to help him. Maybe he should try to take his mind off it. "Cyrus?" he called over. "Why did you say the EPR device can't work?"

The engineer said nothing for a moment, then shook his head slightly. "I don't want to talk about it."

"But you did say it was impossible."

"That's right."

"But why?"

"Scott, you studied physics, you know just as well as I do."

"That was a long time ago. I've forgotten 90% of what I learned."

"The thing is, it might sound plausible, but it's just not."

"I just want to understand why you think that?"

Cyrus shifted a little and lifted his head; he seemed to buck up a bit. "Just because you know the spin of a particle millions of kilometers away doesn't mean that the person there knows it. You have to tell them, so you're back to normal comms. If you try to change the state of either of the particles to send a message, then you break the entanglement."

"So, it's not possible?"

"That's my understanding."

"Is there any way it might work?"

Cyrus scratched at the scabs that had formed along the interface of his left eye-socket. He let his hand drop. "I've been trying to think about that." Scott's interrogation was having the desired effect: Cyrus was beginning to come back to life. "But every time I try, I come up blank. The problem is, how do you change state without breaking the entanglement?"

"What about multiple pairs in different states, and the message is done by using a different subset each time?"

"Yes, but how do you tell the recipient which subset you're using? You're back to normal comms again."

Scott scratched his chin. "Yeah, I see the problem."

"But those two guys seemed pretty certain it worked," Miranda now chimed in. Scott wondered how this would go down with Cyrus, who saw her as the primary source of his problems. "They said they had seen the data?"

Cyrus hesitated for a moment, then replied. "Yeah, that's what's puzzling me. They were so sure. But I can't see how. Maybe I simply

don't understand enough to figure it out. Or I'm simply not thinking outside the box."

Scott breathed a slight sigh of relief that at least Cyrus wasn't going to be totally antagonistic—not that Scott could blame him.

"Speaking of entanglement," said Steph, "what I'd like to know is how are we going to untangle ourselves from this situation?" As always, Steph had a way of asking the right question at the right time. Yet, like the conundrum of faster-than-light communications, their situation seemed impossible.

The door to the room burst open and two guards entered, shoving a bruised and battered-looking Rick Marantz in amongst them. The guards left, locking the door behind them.

"Rick, what happened? Are you okay?" Scott rushed over to him as he sat up on the floor, wiping some blood from his forehead.

"I'm okay." He glanced around at the rest of the crew. "Can someone please tell me what the hell is going on?"

There ensued a few minutes of excited crosstalk as the old miner was brought up to speed on their situation. He didn't say much—he never did. He just alternated between nodding and looking stunned as the events and revelations of the past few hours were relayed to him.

"So, what happened on the ship?" Scott finally asked.

"It was boarded. I couldn't stop them—they had the authority, so what could I do? Anyway, there were six or seven of them, started doing a search. One was a tech, had a load of gear with her. She was trying to hack into our central system, but...", Rick looked back at them all for a moment, "Aria was putting up a fight. I swear to god, I think that QI is sentient. It started shutting down systems, bringing things offline. I've never seen anything like it. It spooked some of the others too, so much so that they decided to leave the ship. They brought me with them back here, started asking a lot of questions: where's the device, we know you know, and all that crap. When I didn't answer, they started getting heavy." Rick gave Scott a stern look. "But I told them shit." He shrugged. "Eventually they brought me here."

Scott sat back against the wall again as the others continued to pick through the finer details of Rick's story. But the commander had heard all he needed to. Two things were becoming clear to him. The first was that they were all being taken out of the equation, as Miranda had reckoned. But he already suspected that. The second

was that, apart from his crew and the pirates that attacked them, no one else knew where the EPR device was. And just maybe he could use this to their advantage. The question was how?

FLIGHT TO THE DOCKS

"We need to get out of here, and soon." The others stopped talking and looked over at Scott. The commander shifted his position and leaned in a little. "From what Rick is saying, Xiang Zu are trying to hack our ship's systems to get information on the pirate attack and where the device might be. If they get in, then they could do the same calculation we did and figure out that the device is probably here in Neo City. If they do work this out, then what good are we to them?"

"Are you saying they would let us go?" said Steph.

"No," said Miranda. She looked over at Scott. "What he's saying, I think, is that we become dispensable. Nothing to stop them shoving us out the nearest airlock with nothing but a single breath in our lungs."

"No way," said Steph, "they wouldn't do that."

"You think?" said Scott. "Neo is a city founded on turning a blind eye to whatever needs to be done. So okay, maybe they wouldn't go that far. But the thing that worries me is, what's to stop them?"

"You have a point there, Scott," said Rick. "I know these guys, I worked for them for a while, and believe me: they stop at nothing to get what they want."

"The other thing is, as far as I can tell, it's just us and the crew of the pirate ship that know the location of the EPR device. But that may change very soon, so we have a limited window of time."

"You're not seriously thinking of going after it?" said Steph.

"If the opportunity presents itself, why not? But I think we would all settle for simply getting off this rock, with or without the EPR device."

Cyrus sighed and shook his head. "I have a major problem with that, in that I can't see shit."

"All your gear is outside." Rick pointed toward the door. "I saw it when they brought me in."

"What's out there? Both myself and Miranda were unconscious when they brought us in, so we've no idea." Scott's voice became

quieter, almost a whisper. The group shuffled in closer. They were growing conspiratorial; they were making a plan.

"This leads out into a big room, like a workshop, machines and stuff everywhere. Your gear is on a table in the center."

"A workshop—not a barracks?" Scott started to look more closely at the room they were in. It wasn't a cell—it was not designed as a holding pen. He hadn't noticed before, but now that he looked, he could see it was just a plain old room that might have been used for storage at some time.

"Apparently," Rick continued, "there was, or maybe still is, a riot going on in some sector downtown. The cells are full, so they had to use this place. I overheard the guards talking about it."

"How many do you think are out there?"

Rick scratched his chin. "Two, possibly three."

Scott looked over at Miranda. He could see she was thinking the same thing: could they take them?

"Big difference between two and three," she said. "But I'm willing to give it a try... if I know I've got some backup this time?" She gave Scott a look.

"You can count on it."

"Hold on. Just wait a minute." Steph was getting rattled by the direction the conversation was turning. "Suppose we do get out of this room, then what? How do we get back to the dock without being spotted? How do we get back to the ship? And even if we do, it's probably crawling with Neo City people."

Scott didn't have an answer; he hadn't really thought that far ahead.

"Perhaps this would help," said Rick, and he took off his shoe and fiddled with something on the heel. A small compartment opened out, and from it, Rick pulled out a small earpiece comms unit.

"Rick, you're a goddamn master," said Scott.

"With this, we can contact Aria and find out what's going on onboard the ship," said Rick. "The only problem is it won't work in here. We need to be outside this rock and onto the dock area before we can use it."

"I still don't see how it helps us get off the asteroid," said Steph.

"I don't know either," said Scott, "but we have to try. We need to put our destiny in our own hands, and not at the mercy of Neo City and Xiang Zu thugs. If we can get off this asteroid, then at least we

have a chance to go home."

The crew went quiet for a moment. "But we all have to be in this together. So, what's it going to be?" Scott continued.

Miranda and Rick were in at the first mention of an escape attempt. Cyrus, who had been very quiet for most of the conversation, spoke first. "If it means I can get my eyes back, then count me in."

The rest turned to Steph. "Oh, what the heck. I'm getting bored in here, anyway."



* * *

It took them at least another half-hour to all agree on the initial stage of the escape plan, this being how to get out of the room they were incarcerated in. They kept it simple: create a ruckus and jump the guards. Steph and Cyrus took up positions out of the way against a side wall. Rick stood to one side of the door, and Miranda climbed up on to a tiny ledge directly above it. Scott took his position right in front of the door and looked at them all in turn "Ready?"

When he got the thumbs up, he approached the door and started banging on it as hard and loud as he could. "Hey, can we get some water in here? We're all dying of thirst." He kept pounding and shouting, creating a hell of a racket until he heard footsteps approaching. He glanced up at Miranda. Her face was a study in concentration, her muscles taut with the strain of keeping herself in place.

"Stand back from the door," came a shout from the other side. Scott moved back a little. The door opened a crack and a bottle of water rolled in along the floor.

Shit, thought Scott. He looked up at Miranda again. She shook her head. Dammit, the door isn't open wide enough. I need to get

the guard in here. He lunged forward and grabbed the edge of the door with both hands and wrenched it open. The guard stood there momentarily shocked by the suddenness of the action. He hesitated, then took out a handheld plasma weapon and stepped inside—just far enough for Miranda to land on top of him. She straddled his neck, and they both came crashing to the floor. The gun discharged, firing an incandescent bloom of plasma against the back wall of the room. It radiated out from the impact point in a circle of electrical mayhem. Scott landed a knee down on the guard's wrist with all his weight. He heard a crack, and the guard screamed as Scott wrenched the gun out of his broken hand.

A second guard was now running at them, taking aim at Miranda's back when Scott twisted around and shot him. The guard's body shook and convulsed, and finally collapsed on the floor. Miranda shouted at Scott and motioned to the guard she was struggling with on the floor. "Ready?"

"Yeah." He stood up and aimed down at the trapped guard. Miranda released her grip and rolled off, just as Scott pulled the trigger. But before he could even catch his breath, Miranda was out the door, taking the weapon from the other fallen guard. Scott chased after her.

She was now scanning the workshop area for additional guards and motioned for him to take the other side. Between them, they moved forward, checking for any other threats. There were none. So far, so good, thought Scott. He looked over at Miranda. She was inside the exit door, keeping guard, on high alert. A bead of sweat rolled down her forehead. She was breathing heavily, but her face radiated a feral joy. He realized that she was in her element: she was relishing the fight; it was what she had been missing. And at that very moment, he caught a glimpse of the real Miranda Lee.

Behind him, Rick and Steph were already helping Cyrus out of the room and over to the table where their gear had been stored. Thankfully it was still there.

Miranda beckoned to him. He moved over to the exit door. "Keep lookout here while I get our stuff," she said.

"Sure."

She gave him a long look. "Thanks, by the way."

Scott wasn't sure what she meant. "For what?"

"Saving my ass in there."

He smiled and nodded. "No problem."

She slapped him on the side of his arm. "You did good in there—Commander." She said it like she meant it this time.

Scott glanced around, inspecting the area they now found themselves in. Rick was right: it was some sort of disused workshop. Along the side walls, storage racks stood empty, save for the odd container or spool of wire. In the center was a long workshop table where Cyrus was refitting his visor with help from Steph. He looked relieved; hopefully he was regaining his sight. Miranda was gathering up the rest of their gear.

Scott continued his scan of the area, looking for cameras this time. He found none. That didn't mean they weren't there, but it seemed that Rick was right, and this had been a temporary holding area not designed for permanent incarceration. So, if they played this right, they could get quite a distance before anyone noticed they were gone. He looked back at the others and saw Rick and Miranda dragging the stunned guard back into the room they had escaped from. This gave him an idea.

A few moments later, Scott and Miranda were back at the exit door, both dressed in the dark guard uniforms. Scott realized, to his surprise, that the visors the guards wore gave an augmented view of the world. As he tilted his head this way and that, a map overlay moved with him, showing their location and a ghostly sketch of what lay beyond. Scott found he could adjust the resolution via a simple dial on the side of the visor. He spent a moment fiddling with this while waiting for Miranda to adjust the uniform she wore. It was much too big for her and she looked lost inside it. She was busy trying to make it fit somehow.

The ruse they were planning was that Scott and Miranda, now disguised as two guards, were escorting an unruly crew up to the dock where they would be expedited from Neo City, never to return. They reckoned that since there had been some sort of riot downtown earlier on, this might fly as a story if they were stopped and queried. Since nobody objected to this plan, and seeing as how no one came up with a better one, they decided to run with it. Rick looked resigned and stoic while Cyrus and Steph looked borderline terrified.

"Okay," said Scott, jerking a thumb at the door, and simultaneously fiddling with the visor, "through here should be a garage of some kind for storing ground vehicles. That should lead directly out onto a main thoroughfare. We can take it all the way to

the end of the city and try and get up to the dock from there. Everyone ready?"

Some nodded, some quietly gulped. Scott opened the door very slowly and peered out through the crack. He opened it wider as he grew in confidence and they began to move out tentatively.

The space was dark, dimly lit by shafts of hazy light entering from windows high up on the end wall. Inside, they could see several ground cars, similar to the ones they arrived in. "Hey, we should use one of these... transport pods," whispered Cyrus, as he examined one of the vehicles.

The others moved over. "It's an official car—see the markings on it?" Cyrus climbed in and sat in the driver's seat, examining the controls. He flicked a switch, and the dash came to life. He studied it for a second or two. "Hey, Scott. Give me your badge." He pointed at the metal Neo City crest attached to the breast pocket of Scott's uniform. "I saw them use these for access. I think it's like a key."

Scott realized it was magnetic, and it detached easily from its mount on the uniform. He handed it to Cyrus, who quickly passed it over a reader on the dash. The main screen flashed and displayed a multitude of options. "Bonus," said Cyrus, "it's autonomous, and if I'm not mistaken, looks like it can bring us all the way to the location of our lander on the dock." He looked over at the others with a big smile. "Right up to our front door."

"Okay, let's do it. It's as good a plan as any," said Scott.

They climbed on board and Scott sat up front. Rick, Cyrus, and Steph sat in the middle with Miranda riding shotgun in the back. This way they hoped to maintain the pretense that they were moving prisoners.

Scott punched in the coordinates for the dock. "Okay, here goes." He tapped a flashing icon on the screen labeled "commence journey."

The car moved off, quietly heading across the garage. A crack of light appeared in the end wall, widening as they approached. The car glided out into a bright and busy plaza, turning this way and that as it maneuvered onto a wide track. This looked to be a primary vehicle artery that traversed the asteroid city along its length. It was also busy with traffic. Cars and small trucks, all autonomous, whipped by with impressive speed. Around them on the central plaza, a scattering of people went about their business. No one paid them any attention. The car glided smoothly up onto a

ramp, picking up speed as it did, and finally joined the main traffic.

Scott began to feel they might just pull this off. There was a sense of anonymity granted them by the crowded city. People going about their business, oblivious to the lives being lived all around. Like any metropolis anywhere in the system, Neo City was no different in its indifference to the individual lives of its inhabitants.

As the city flew past on either side, Scott could see buildings, plazas, parklands, pathways, and citizens gently curving up on either side, rising to meet again high up, one kilometer above. Ahead, the end cap of the city was fast approaching. A massive circular wall spread out across his field of view. It was a confusion of different levels, intersected by a multitude of gantries, tubes, and walkways. Here and there, dense vegetation hung down, where down meant toward the rim of this cylindrical metropolis.

The car slowed as it headed for an opening in the wall. Traffic bunched together and began to sort itself into two single lanes as the cars ordered themselves for the lift tubes. They closed up, bumper to bumper, and slowed to a crawl. Their forward view was blocked by a heavily loaded flatbed in front of them. Scott looked around at the congested scene. Some cars were distinctly goods only, laden with cargo and no humans on board. Others carried people; presumably some transported crew returning to ships on the dock above. Scott studied their faces, wondering if any were the pirates that had attacked them out on the edge of the Belt.

The car jolted and moved forward by one length. A moment earlier, they had entered a short tunnel and could now see the lift tubes on either side. But progress was slow, and being in such close proximity to other people began to ratchet up the general crew anxiety. Scott found his eyes darting this way and that with each raised voice, each burst of laughter, and every jolt of the car.

There were only two cars ahead of them when a guard sauntered out from behind the lift tube wall. Shit, thought Scott. He took a furtive glance back at Miranda. He knew from the look on her face that she too had seen the guard. Scott returned his gaze ahead, not looking left or right. The car jolted forward one more slot.

"Where are you taking that lot?"

Scott stiffened when he heard the guard call over to him. He looked over cautiously. The guard was leaning against the side wall of the lift tube in a very relaxed manner, probably just bored, looking for some conversation rather than a real answer to his

question.

Scott pointed up. "Dock." He kept his answer short and looked straight ahead. Come on, come on, he thought as the car directly in front entered the lift.

"Good luck, it's a goddamn mess up there." The guard shifted his weight off the wall and started moving over to them. "How come they got you taking them up there?" He was beside the car now, giving them a good look up and down.

"Shit if I know," said Scott with a dismissive shrug. "Just doing what I'm told."

The guard nodded, "Ain't that the truth, buddy. But the whole dock is on lockdown. Nobody gets off until they lift it. Everyone's going crazy up there." He shrugged. "Just telling ya."

Scott could see the lift arrive, ready to take their car. He looked over at the guard and waved a hand as the car finally moved into the lift. "Thanks for the heads-up," he shouted back.

"What the hell was that about? Why's the dock on lockdown?" Cyrus whispered as the lift started moving.

"We've been found out, that's why," said Steph.

"No, I don't think so," said Scott. "If we were, then that guard would be on the lookout for us. As it was, he was simply having a friendly chat. Buddy-to-buddy. No big deal."

"I don't like it," said Steph.

"It means we can't get off. We're stuck here," said Cyrus.

"Will everybody just get a grip? We'll be entering the dock soon. That means we'll be outside the asteroid, and can contact Aria to see what's happening on the ship." Scott could already feel the artificial gravity created by the spin of the interior rim now fading away as they moved closer to the central axis. The car slowed dramatically and then shifted direction, heading out along the underside of the dock. They were weightless now, held in place only by the seat harness.

The dock seemed way more crowded than before, and the pace of the entire area had slowed down. Miranda shouted out to him from the back of the pod. "Scott, check the dash screen, see if there is any information on what's happening."

He tapped a few icons that looked like they might lead to an alert feed. Sure enough, he found it. "It says here that undocking has been temporarily disabled pending a routine safety check."

"What does that mean?" said Miranda.

"It means we can't leave, no one can, not even the big ships," said Cyrus.

"But Aria isn't docked," said Steph.

"Yeah, but we still need to get to it, and we don't know who's on it, either."

"Shit," said Cyrus.

The car finally stopped at the airlock entrance to their lander. Around the area, several knots of people were floating about, waiting for the lockdown to be lifted. Two of them seemed to take a particular interest in Scott as he disembarked from the ground car. They broke away from their group and approached.

"Say, when can we leave? When's all this safety check bullshit going to be over?"

"I don't know," Scott shrugged.

"We gotta be in Vesta in less than six days."

"Sorry, nothing I can do."

"Sorry? Well that's not good enough." They started getting aggressive.

Scott pulled his gun out and pointed it at them. "Listen, I got my own problems to deal with. So why don't you do yourselves a favor and take a hike?"

One of the two started to make a move, but his friend held him back. "It's not worth it, Jake. Just leave it." This seemed to settle him and, after a momentary staring match, the two moved off, muttering obscenities as they went.

"Jeez," said Cyrus, "those guard disguises are more of a hindrance than a help out here."

Scott made a head gesture at the airlock door. "Come on, let's get out of sight."

They moved in through the first door to the short tunnel leading back up to their lander. Finally, when they were all out of sight, they started to relax a little. Miranda took off her guard helmet. "I'm going to try to contact Aria." She took the comms unit out of a pocket and inserted it in her ear. Scott turned to enter the door code for the final airlock that would give them access to their lander.

"Wait, don't do that." Cyrus grabbed Scott's hand.

"That's the code they gave us when we landed. If you punch it in they'll know we're here."

"Shit," said Scott as his hand lowered. "Can you bypass it?"

Cyrus smiled. "Of course. It'll take a few minutes. But we still need to find a way to release the dock anchors. That's a lot trickier since the whole place is in lockdown."

"I've got Aria." Miranda raised a hand to cover her earpiece. She held up her other to quiet them all down and stared into space as she concentrated on the communication. "Three people on board," she started to relay the information, "two guards... searching the ship. One tech... on the bridge trying to hack into the ship's systems... been at it for hours... Aria fighting her off."

"Can Aria get rid of them? Create an emergency evacuation scenario or something?" said Rick.

"Wait a minute." Scott raised a hand and turned to his chief engineer. "What about the EPR Device? Is it still there?"

The engineer brought a hand up to the side of his visor, fiddled with it, and looked back at Scott. "Still there. Hasn't moved."

"You're not thinking of trying to get it back?" said Steph.

"I'm thinking of a way off this asteroid." He turned back to Cyrus. "That ship that the EPR Device is on, it has a shuttle, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, and a couple of maintenance pods. Why?"

"You think you could hack your way into that ship?"

"I spent three years on Excelsior transports," said Cyrus. "There's nothing I don't know about them."

"What about the crew? We don't have the weapons. They would just kill us all—it would be crazy," said Steph.

"That depends on how many there are. It's possible that the ship could be deserted," said Miranda.

"We don't know that," said Rick.

"But there is a way to find out," said Scott. "We could get Aria to move the Hermes out of its current orbital location into a position where it can do a thermal scan of the pirate ship. That way, we can find out how many lifeforms are on board. If it's deserted or maybe even just under one or two, we go in, find the EPR device, and haul ass in the ship's shuttle." Scott stood, checking their faces for a response.

"Sounds crazy," said Steph.

"There is no other way off this rock as long as they have the dock in lockdown. We can't use our lander, we're stuck," said Cyrus.

"What if we just forget the EPR device, go into the lander, put our EVA suits on, and just float out of the hatch over to the ship?"

offered Steph.

"Very tricky. We could end up floating out into space if we time it wrong," said Miranda.

"You're also forgetting: I don't have a suit. I'll be stuck here," said Rick.

"Let's just see what Aria can do first. Then we can decide, okay?" said Scott.

There was a muted agreement as Miranda contacted the ship again. While they waited, Scott decided now might be a good time to check his weapon. He had a feeling he was going to need it.

PURGE

Haruna Yoneyama sat in the commander's chair on board the asteroid survey vessel Hermes. She had been parked in this seat for hours as she tried in vain to access the ship's central database. She was looking for any information pertaining to the attack by the pirate vessel and, more importantly, what had happened to the EPR device. But try as she might, the ship's QI was not having any of it. It had so far thwarted all her efforts to break through its firewall.

Had it been a standard AI she was dealing with, then she may have had a chance, but a quantum intelligence was several orders of magnitude more complex. They operated on a completely different level, almost within a different dimension. And she was pretty sure this one was virtually sentient.

Haruna had explained the near impossibility of hacking a QI to Hao and Su before they sent her up here, but her entreaties had fallen on deaf ears. So, here she was, doing battle with a QI. It was ridiculous.

The other problem with this QI was that it was old and, like humans, the older they get, the wiser they become. Hao and Su had assumed that an antique ship such as this one could not possibly have a computer that would be up to much. But they had failed to realize just how weird a quantum-enabled artificial intelligence could be. It learned all the time and, given enough time, it learned a hell of a lot. To the point where it could simply solve problems in ways that were incomprehensible to even the most brilliant humans. So what hope did she have?

The search party had already finished their initial sweep of the ship for the EPR device and found nothing. Most of them had left now, leaving only Haruna and two guards who were down in the ship's canteen, stuffing their faces. She sighed and glanced at the scrolling lines of code cascading down the screen. She had thought of yet another angle to try to get past the QI's defenses. This time, she was piggy-backing on its query protocol, hoping she might be able to filter out raw packet data.

In the middle of this procedure, the screen suddenly went blank, then rebooted itself and displayed a message:

Attention, all crew prepare for a heavy acceleration burn commencing in 5:00 minutes. Then followed a series of navigational vectors.

Oh crap, thought Haruna. Is this doing what I think it is? Her fears were confirmed a few seconds later when she felt a subtle change in the ship's momentum. It was moving, possibly further out from Neo City to enable it to initiate a burn.

She snapped at her communicator. "Officer Renton, we need to get the hell out of here, now!"

"What... what are you on about?" He sounded muffled.

"The ship is going to initiate a burn in... 4 minutes 19 seconds to..." Haruna studied the vectors displayed, "Ceres!"

"But we can't leave. We have orders to stay here."

"Suit yourself. I'm leaving. You can send me a postcard when you get there." She jumped out of the seat, picked up her gear, and ran for the door. By the time she was clambering into the shuttle, Renton and the other guard had decided to take her advice and get out. They were now floating across the hangar to the shuttle as Haruna powered up the craft.

"Attention," the disembodied voice of the ship's QI echoed out of the shuttle's comms, "one minute and forty-two seconds until burn."

The hangar doors opened and Haruna gently took the craft out and, once clear, headed for Neo City at high speed.



* * *

Aria, satisfied that it had successfully purged the ship of intruders, slowly moved the craft from its current position at the front end of the asteroid city toward the rear docking platform. From there, it could do a thorough scan of the pirate craft.

It had been relieved to hear the voice of Flight Officer Miranda Lee explaining what had happened, and that the rest of the crew were okay. It had been even happier to hear that they had decided to attempt to retrieve the EPR device. As far as Aria was concerned, anything it could do to facilitate its crew was a top priority. If they were successful then maybe, just maybe, it could manipulate the situation and divert to Europa. But it was getting ahead of itself, falling into the trap of hoping too much. It wasn't seemly for a QI to be dealing in speculation—it still had a lot of work to do.

WEAPONS CHECK

The crew navigated their way down through the main dock, looking for the access point to the gantry that ran alongside the pirate vessel. Miranda moved ahead, still wearing the guard uniform, while the others followed behind. They had continued with the ruse that they were escorting a crew back to their ship, so Scott took up the rear.

Aria had already moved the *Hermes* and performed an extensive scan of the pirate vessel. To their relief, it only had one person on board, located on the forward bridge. But one person could do a lot of damage if they were armed—which they all reckoned this person certainly would be.

The plan was to hack the ship's exterior access system and gain entry that way. Cyrus seemed confident in his ability to do this since he had spent several years as an engineer working with this same class of ship. Nevertheless, Scott's levels of anxiety kept ratcheting up the closer they got. This was coupled with rising self-doubt about the risk he was putting the crew in.

Ever since the discovery of the wrecked *Bao Zheng* and the retrieval of the *EPR* device, he had been gaining a little more respect from them. Even Miranda had stopped chewing his balls, mostly. But were they placing too much trust in his crazy plan? After all, the authorities in *Neo City* must have figured it out by now that they had escaped and, as soon as the *Hermes* started repositioning itself, they would check up on them, only to find two naked guards trussed up. He stopped abruptly as a thought struck him.

"What is it?" Cyrus whispered from behind.

Scott maneuvered his body around in the zero-gee environment and detached the *Neo City* insignia from the breast pocket of his uniform. He held it up, turning it this way and that. "Do you think this might have a tracker?" He looked at Cyrus. "Can they find us with this?"

Miranda had now moved up beside them. "What's the problem?"

"We're being tracked," said Steph.

"What?"

"I don't know for sure, but we could be." Scott waved the insignia at Miranda. "They might be able to track our location with these."

Miranda pulled the unit off her uniform. "We need to get rid of them. Here... give me that."

Scott handed it to her. "What are you going to do with them?"

"Stay here." She turned and started back up the short tunnel they were in toward the main dock.

"Miranda, wait. Where are you going?" Scott was getting anxious. They were beginning to draw too much attention to themselves. A work crew further along began to take an interest, heads turning their way.

"Chill out. I'll be back in a minute," she said without turning back or losing her forward momentum.

Shit, thought Scott. What the hell is she up to? Scott tried to act casual, but he had a distinct feeling of eyes on him. The others were no better. They shifted and looked anything but comfortable.

After a very long few minutes, Miranda reappeared, floating back down the tunnel. "Done," she said. "I threw them into a passing flatbed truck. They're on their way back inside the asteroid."

"Okay, let's get on with locating the access point," said Scott. But as he turned to go, Cyrus touched his arm to get his attention and pointed. "That's it," he said. "It's just up there." Ahead of them, a sign on the wall read B13.

This access point would bring them into a long tunnel that ran perpendicular to the main dock. There were a great many of these on both sides, as well as other spurs directly beneath. The tunnel itself ran inside a long steel superstructure where ships could come in and dock alongside. They were clamped in position, and umbilicals ran from the tunnel directly to the airlocks on the ship. This enabled disembarkation in a comfortable one atmosphere, no need for EVA.

But it was these clamps that also prevented the ships from leaving. They were controlled by the dock authority and, as far as Scott could tell, the lockdown was still in place. However, the shuttle on the craft was free to leave: since it was attached to the underbelly of the ship like a limpet, it had nothing to restrict its departure. They just needed to get to it.

They turned into the tunnel marked B13. This ran along the side of the ship and looked to be free of traffic. Cyrus now floated ahead, shifting his head this way and that, touching the side of his visor, trying to locate the tracking beacon he had attached to the EPR device. Scott wondered if that was all they would find: just a tracking beacon, attached to nothing.

Cyrus stopped and pointed. "It's around here, in the secondary cargo hold." He floated further along the corridor. "Over here," he beckoned with an arm. "Here's the airlock for the main hold." He looked at the others expectantly as they gathered around. "So, are we going to do this?"

Miranda raised a hand. "Let me check with Aria first and make sure that person is still on the bridge." She tapped her comms unit. "Aria, any update?" She waited a moment for a reply and then looked back at them. "Still there. Hasn't moved."

"Okay, let's get to work," said Scott.

Cyrus tapped the side of his visor, extracting a small thin tool, similar to a screwdriver, and set to work on the airlock touch pad. After a moment, there was a faint hiss as the door swung open, and they all piled in. Cyrus started on the inner door.

Miranda kept checking and rechecking her weapon. Scott looked over at her, and she grinned at him. "Just making sure." She gestured at her weapon.

The second set of doors swung open, and they entered the short umbilical tunnel that attached to the exterior of the vessel. Ahead, they could see a gray metal airlock embedded in the hull. Cyrus was already opening some small hatch at the base of the door. "This should be easy—it has a manual override. The only problem," he said as he twisted some lever, "is it's mechanical, so it's going to be slow." He started rotating the handle, grunting with each turn. The airlock door moved up a few millimeters.

"Crap, this is going to take forever," said Scott.

"Here, let me do it." Rick pushed Cyrus aside and put his back into it and the door slowly rose up, enough that they could squeeze in underneath. He stopped. "That should be enough."

Scott was first through, the others following. Miranda took up the rear. They had only taken a few steps inside when she froze and put one hand up to her comms unit. "Wait!"

"What is it?" said Scott.

"It's Aria. The person on the bridge is moving... our way."

"Shit," said Scott. "We must have triggered an alarm. Quick, let's get this door closed."

They were effectively trapped in the airlock until the outer door closed. Cyrus dispensed with using the manual closing mechanism; now that their cover was blown there was no point, so he just hit the button to close the outer door. Scott and Miranda took up positions facing the inner door, weapons ready. It opened upward with a whoosh straight on to a metal gantry jutting out into a large cargo bay. They moved out, and Cyrus scanned the space. "This way. It should be inside the next compartment." Fortunately, they were moving in the opposite direction to the bridge, but it still didn't give them much time. Miranda fell back to cover their rear as they made their way through a large bulkhead door to the next cargo bay. This was smaller than the previous one but was packed with cargo containers. "We'll never find it in here," said Steph.

"Over here." The engineer floated out across the cargo bay, making his way using the rails and straps that crisscrossed the space.

"This is it," he shouted over to them. "It's still here. I found it. Quick, quick."

Scott grabbed a rail to guide himself over when Miranda shouted at him; she had a hand cupped over her earpiece. "He's at the airlock... moving this way."

Scott looked up at the bulkhead door they had all just come through. It was still open.

"Miranda," he shouted back, "you need to close the door. Keep him out." He pushed himself off the rail and floated over to help her. Before he got there, a shadow moved on the far side and the space exploded in a hail of incandescent plasma fire. Something hit him on his right side and he went tumbling out of control, banging and bumping into cargo boxes and support beams. He heard more weapons fire. Probably Miranda firing back, he thought as he eventually grabbed hold of a strap and came to a halt.

She was behind a cargo container, firing at the doorway in bursts. Shrapnel and debris sprayed all around. This guy is packing some serious firepower, he thought, not a stun gun. Another burst of fire erupted from the doorway, hitting containers and sending more debris flying in all directions. He couldn't see Cyrus, Rick, or Steph. They must have taken cover when the shooting started.

Miranda again fired back, but another burst hit the container

she was using as cover. She ducked, put her arm over her head and began to fall back. She spotted Scott and frantically waved him over to her location before she stood up and fired a burst at the doorway. Scott launched himself off with all his strength and came crashing in beside her.

"Bastard's got some heavy weaponry. We'll be annihilated if we don't take him out," she said as she rechecked her weapon. "And this gun is running out of charge."

Another burst of fire, but this time it came from inside. "Goddamnit, he's getting closer." She stuck her head up and fired again. Then ducked back down. "He's behind the container nearest the door. I want you to cover me."

"What?" Scott had no clear idea what this meant.

"Just keep firing at that spot so he can't get a chance to fire back. I'm going to move in behind him."

"What?"

"Now, do it now."

Scott poked his head around the side of the container and started firing. Miranda launched herself off and covered the space between them with impressive speed and accuracy. She landed on top of the container where the guy had taken cover and waved to Scott to stop firing. He ducked back down behind the container just as another blast hit and sent him tumbling backward again. Pain rippled up from his ribcage, and he looked down to see a long metal shard protruding from his side. Blood oozed and seeped from the wound as he clasped a hand over it. Oh shit, he thought.

In the background, he could hear blasts from Miranda's weapon, then silence. He floated there for a moment, not sure what to do, when Miranda came back over. She took one look at him, then grabbed his hand and pressed it hard against the wound. "Keep it tight as you can. It will help stem the blood."

Scott groaned with pain.

"Stay here; I'll go get the others." She floated off.

A moment later, he saw Cyrus moving toward him. He had a tether onto the container with the EPR device, which was floating behind him. The engineer took one look at Scott. "Ah jeez, not you, too."

"I'm okay," said Scott, although he wasn't sure if this was strictly true.

Rick was being carried by Steph and Miranda. His upper body

was burnt and blackened, as was most of his chest and right arm. His eyes were closed.

"Rick. Rick," Scott called out as he tried to move. The pain from the wound was searing through his body. "What happened?"

"He took a direct hit. He's bad—gotta get him to medbay as fast as possible... and you, too." Miranda grabbed his arm and helped him move.

"Rick, no," he groaned, "not Rick."

"Come on. We need to get to that shuttle." Miranda was tugging at him.

They moved out of the cargo bay and into a series of corridors and walkways. Scott paid little attention to his surroundings; he just focused on following along behind Steph and Cyrus, who were carrying the stricken miner. They eventually found the airlock to the shuttle and after some obscenities from Cyrus, the door opened and they floated in. Scott was put in a seat, and Miranda ripped off part of her guard tunic, tore it into strips, and started to bandage his ribcage. He screamed out in pain. Steph was shouting at Cyrus, "Hurry, hurry—we've got to get them back."

"I'm working on it, goddamnit," he shouted back. Finally, the shuttle console lit up like a convenience store on a dark street.

Scott felt cold; his vision was blurry, his mind getting fuzzy. He felt the shuttle drop out from the belly of the ship and was slammed back in his seat by the thrust of the engines. He passed out.

THE GATHERING ARMADA

A dim light smudged itself across Commander Scott McNabb's inner eye. He wasn't sure if his eyelids were open or not. A vague voice—or was it voices?—drifted in from somewhere. He strained to catch them, to get their meaning. He tried to focus.

"Scott. Scott?" He knew that voice, recognized its tone, its rhythm.

A thin slit of blurry light broke across his field of vision and his eyelids slowly flickered open. A fuzzy figure blocked the light and looked down on him from above. "Scott, can you hear me?"

"Yeah," he mouthed. His throat felt like parchment, his voice a shrill wind in a hollow tube. He tried to move.

"Don't." A hand pressed against his shoulder. "Try not to move."

He knew the voice now. "Miranda?" he croaked.

"Yes, now just take it easy."

"I... I'm still alive."

"Yes. You'll be okay after a while, once the wound heals."

Scott relaxed a little, then stiffened as he remembered. "Rick. How's Rick?"

There was a moment's silence. "Rick... didn't make it."

Scott groaned and lay back. "No. Not Rick."

"He took a direct hit, died before we got him back to medbay."

Scott wanted to go back to the time before he woke up, back to oblivion. He couldn't face it: Rick dead, and him still alive. He was responsible. His actions led to this.

Others now entered the medbay, and Scott felt their presence. He closed his eyes again.

"You tell him?" someone said.

"Yeah," came the reply.

There was a hush. Scott opened his eyes again and tried to sit up. This time, Miranda let him and even helped. Steph and Cyrus were there.

"What a goddamn mess." Scott's voice sounded stronger now.

No one replied.

He looked around at the medbay. "We got back?"

"Yeah, just about."

"Where are we now?"

"Two days out from Neo City, heading for Ceres."

"Two days?" Scott was shocked. "How long have I been out?"

"You passed out on the shuttle, so quite a while."

Scott lifted his hand to wipe his forehead; it was weak and heavy. "We got to do right by Rick when we get back to Ceres."

"Eh... there might be a problem with that." Cyrus took a seat beside his bed.

"What do you mean? We got the EPR device, didn't we?"

"Yeah, but..." He looked up at Miranda. "Do you want to tell him?"

Scott sat up further and felt the pain in his side. But it was duller now; presumably they had pumped him with painkillers.

"Here, drink this." Steph handed him a bottle of water.

"Thanks." He took a gulp and felt it cool his throat. His head cleared a little.

"So, what's the problem?" He took another sip of water.

"We've got four ships chasing us out of Neo City. One is the pirate vessel, one is Xiang Zu Corporation—which is essentially a Neo City ship—and the other two we're not sure. Although, we think one might be Martian."

"Martian?"

"Yeah."

"Can we outrun them?" Scott shifted a little as pain stabbed at his side.

"Not a chance."

"But that's not the real problem." Cyrus came over beside him.

"We've also got an armed Dyrell vessel from Earth between us and Ceres."

"How the hell did that get there?"

"It's been there for a while according to HQ. It has been moving toward Ceres ever since they discovered we'd found the Bao Zheng."

"Can't Ceres do something to help us?"

"They've already dispatched a light frigate, but that won't reach us for several days."

"By then it will be too late," said Miranda.

"What do you mean 'too late'?" said Scott.

"The ships from Neo City are a day behind us. The Dyrell ship is

a day in front. Which means that in twenty-four hours, there will be a showdown unless we think of something."

"Well, that's just great. We've got every scumbag in the solar system after us," said Scott.

"What did you expect? They all want this thing, and they are all prepared to kill to get it. That's why Rick is dead," said Steph.

"Rick knew what he was getting into. We all did," said Miranda.

"We can't bring him back, Steph. So, let's do right by him: sell this thing to the highest bidder and be done with it," said Scott.

"Mars has offered us two million," said Cyrus.

Scott nearly choked on his bottle of water. "Two million?"

"Each. Including Rick's share," said Miranda.

"So, what the hell are we waiting for? Let's get it done and go home."

"Not that simple," said Miranda.

Scott sighed. "Why not?"

"The Dyrell ship has issued a warning that any attempt by us to transfer the device to any party other than them will be met with extreme violence."

"What the hell does that mean? They can hardly destroy us; the EPR device would be destroyed in the process."

"True," said Cyrus, "but I get the impression it's a case of 'if we can't have it then neither can you.'"

"Shit."

"So, what are we going to do?" said Steph.

"Well whatever it is, we've got less than twenty-four hours to do it," said Miranda.

"Perhaps I could make a suggestion." Aria's voice echoed around the medbay.

"Please, be my guest." Scott waved his water bottle at nothing in particular. "Anything is better than nothing."

"Head to Europa."

"Ha, ha," Cyrus burst out laughing. "I think that tech from Neo City must have screwed with your circuits, Aria. That's a crazy idea. And even if we wanted to, how can we get there? We can't outrun these ships. They would catch us, and then we're back to where we started."

"That's not strictly true," said Aria. "Having a section of the torus destroyed has helped us."

"What? You're not going to tell me it's because we've got less

mass?" Cyrus's face took on a look of incredulity.

"Wait. Let's hear what Aria has to say before pouring cold water on it. Unless anyone has any better ideas." Scott sat further up in the bed. No one answered.

"Okay, Aria. Explain to us how we get there, and more importantly, why we should, since I have absolutely no idea how that is going to help us."

"Consider the current scenario for a moment, if you will," Aria started.

Scott got the impression this could take a while, so he sat back in the bed and took some of the strain off his aching ribcage.

"In approximately twenty-four hours, virtually every power in the solar system will be represented in a stand-off between this craft and each other as they all vie for control of the EPR device."

Scott could sense the others were beginning to listen: they were settling themselves down, and they all looked exhausted. Perhaps this same conversation had taken place between them many times, going round and round in circles. So, they were content to let Aria do the talking, no matter how crazy the idea.

"Earth, Mars, The Belt, Neo City, and several of the more powerful corporations all seeking control. The opportunity for armed conflict is extremely high. Moreover, it has the potential to start a war."

"That's a bit melodramatic, Aria," said Steph.

"Not really," said Miranda. "Earth has been itching to export their war off the home planet and into the broader system. Tensions are already at an all-time high between them and Mars for control of the Belt's resources."

"Maybe, but that's a problem way beyond our powers to solve. As it stands, it might be a stretch for all of us to still be alive in a day or two," said Scott.

"Indeed, I have come to that very same conclusion, Commander," the QI continued.

"Well, that's comforting," said Miranda.

"However, Europa is beyond the politics of the inner planets. It stands alone, on the edge of human civilization as a place of research and learning. The fact that the only other known life in the universe has been discovered there makes it a sacred place in the eyes of all parties in this conflict. Europa could provide sanctuary. It would be safe. None of the inner powers would dare attack it."

"Hmmm..." said Scott. "I see your point, but how do we get there?"

"Yeah, how does a hole in our ship make us go faster? I'd like to know that," said Cyrus.

"It doesn't. At least, not in and of itself. However, this ship, being somewhat of a technical mongrel, has been fitted with engines way more powerful than the structure can handle."

"Yes, I know that. We never run more than around 50% power or we start to come apart. I mean, that's why we couldn't outrun the pirate vessel."

"Correct. However, to get the torus to spin back up after the last attack, I had to do a full analysis of every structural component within the ship. This was to enable us to develop a solution to compensate for the shift in mass. I ran a great many simulations and discovered that the ship could indeed take more stress than the initial mission specified."

"Jeez, why didn't you tell us this back when we were being chased down?"

"I did not know then. I was operating the ship in accordance with mission parameters."

Scott sat up again. "So, what you're saying, then, is we can outrun them?"

"No. We can't outrun them," said Aria, a little bluntly.

"So, what's the point, then?" Cyrus stood up and raised his arms in the air.

"We can, however, match their speed. I have calculated this to a probability of 96.25%. It is a twenty-one-day trip to Europa. I calculate we would arrive in orbit approximately seven point three hours before the next closest ship."

The crew paused as they considered this possible way out of their dilemma.

"What's the probability that Europa will give us refuge, Aria?" said Steph.

"Approximately 62.74%."

"That doesn't sound very encouraging."

"Why so low, Aria?" said Scott.

"One has to factor in the amount of firepower that will ultimately be in orbit around Europa once it becomes known that they now possess the EPR device—assuming you land and hand it over to them."

Scott gave a big sigh and wished he hadn't—his ribcage complained painfully. "I don't suppose you've calculated the probability of us getting any financial remuneration after all this?"

"I'm afraid not, Scott. But it seems very unlikely."

"We should have left the damn thing on Neo City. Maybe Rick would still be alive if we had." Steph's voice was low. She wasn't blaming anyone—it was just the way it was.

"We need to make a decision. Time is running out," said Miranda.

Cyrus threw his hands up in the air again. "Do we have any other option?"

"Steph, what about you?" She turned to the geologist.

Steph shrugged. "Well, I've always wanted to visit Europa. I suppose now is as good a time as any."

"Scott, where are you on this?" said Miranda.

He said nothing for a moment, just stared into space. "I have to think. And I have to pay my respects to Rick first. So, if someone could get me some clothes and tell me where he's laid out, that would be great."

TWENTY-ONE DAYS TO EUROPA

Faced with no other option, the crew conceded to Aria's suggestion and charted a course for Europa. It commenced with an excruciating 54-hour heavy acceleration burn—the worst any of them had ever experienced, and for most of this time, Scott was convinced the ship would ultimately shake itself to destruction. This, coupled with the pain from his wounds, was almost beyond his ability to bear. Still weak from his injuries, he drifted in and out of consciousness and at one point awoke to find himself in a pool of his own blood. The heavy gee had started the bleeding again. He worried he might actually bleed to death, even before the ship broke apart. But in the end, he woke up back in medbay; the ship had survived, and so had he.

Fortunately, Aria's calculation proved to be correct, although the ship did suffer minor damage to some of the more sensitive internal equipment. Yet, it was a small price to pay for a chance to keep one step ahead of the armada that was now chasing them down. As soon as the burn completed, Aria increased power to the plasma drive and the ship continued with its acceleration, albeit at a much slower rate. It calculated that they were approximately seven hours ahead of the next fastest pursuer and currently maintaining that gap.

So, for the next few days, the crew rested up. They were shattered, no one more so than Scott. Eventually, on day nine of the twenty-one-day journey to Europa, he finally found the strength to rise to his feet and make his way to the bridge.

It was deserted save for Cyrus, who cut a lonely figure bent over his console. His face bathed in an eerie green wash of light reflected up from the monitor. He looked up from the console and gave Scott a smile. "Jeez, look who's still alive."

Scott hobbled over to his seat and slumped down. "Yeah, finally vertical. So, how are we doing?"

"Do you want the good news or the bad news?"

"Cyrus, I hate when people say that. Just hit me with whatever you got."

"The good news is we're maintaining a distance of around seven hours."

"And the bad?"

"We've picked up a few more ships. They're quite a way behind, though. Aria, can you give us a visual?"

"Certainly, Cyrus."

The holo-table blossomed to life, and a 3D rendering of the solar system ballooned outward. It stretched from the edge of the asteroid belt on one side to Europa and Jupiter on the other. The projection zoomed in to show their current position as a pulsating green marker. Not far behind was a clump of red markers with a tail of others stretching further back like a comet.

"Holy crap." Scott had assumed they would lose a few ships, not gain some. But now he could count at least a dozen, maybe more. "How many?"

"Seventeen, in three main groupings. These two at the front are the Dyrell ship and a Martian vessel. About a day behind them are a bunch of ships... from everywhere, including the frigate from Ceres. Behind that... well, there's a load more."

Scott studied the pulsating red markers as his face displayed a look of utter astonishment. He shook his head. "Ever get the feeling the entire solar system is out to get you?"

Cyrus shrugged. "Sure looks that way."

They sat in silence for a while, gazing at the 3D rendering.

"Aria, can you zoom in on Europa?" Scott finally said.

The projection moved and shifted as the massive planet Jupiter grew in size, its surface textured with vast swirling storms, and they could just pick out the tiny moon of Europa in orbit around the massive gas giant. As Europa grew in size, they began to make out many of the features of this icy world. The smooth, polished surface was etched with dark gashes spidering across its face like some great celestial, bloodshot eyeball, its tiny shadow cast against the vast expanse of Jupiter beyond.

"Aria, can you bring up the main population center?"

The view shifted and rotated, and Europa began to resolve in greater detail, finally stopping when they had a view from a few kilometers above the surface. Great domes and towers rose up from

the icy surface. These were mainly the structures of the universities and research institutions that had established themselves on the moon over the last century. Near the epicenter of these blisters of human civilization stood a vast dome that housed what many regarded as the greatest mind in the solar system—the quantum intelligence, Solomon.

"I never really appreciated how sprawling this place is." Scott moved closer, taking in the scale of the metropolis.

"It has over fifty-seven thousand inhabitants," said Aria, helpfully.

"You know," said Scott, "Rick always wanted to visit here. He used to go on and on about it like it was some sort of utopia."

"Well, it looks like he's gonna get his wish," said Cyrus.

"Scott, what are you doing here? You should be resting." Miranda entered the bridge and rushed over beside him. For a moment he thought she was about to give him a hug or some other gesture of affection. But she pulled herself up short, almost standing to attention in front of him as if to compensate for her emotional concern.

"I needed to get up and move, just to see if I could still do it after that burn."

"God, that was hell." She moved over to her seat. "But you should be resting while you have the chance."

"I'm okay. There's only so much staring at the ceiling in the medbay that I can handle."

Miranda nodded. "I suppose, but take it easy." She paused for a second and gestured at the projection. "Is that Europa?"

"Yeah. I was just saying how much Rick wanted to go there," said Cyrus.

"Rick?"

"Yeah, who would have thought?"

Scott stood up and moved over to the holo-table. "Do the council on Europa know we're coming?"

"Not yet. We were waiting for you to come back to life before sending a message," said Miranda.

"Then we should let them know what we're planning—as soon as possible."

"And what are we planning?" said Cyrus.

Scott lowered his head and scratched his chin. "Hopefully, by the time we get there, we should have a window of opportunity to

land before any of the other ships arrive. I think we should hand the device over to the council and let them negotiate on our behalf."

"What makes you so sure that these ships won't start a fight as soon as they get there?" said Miranda.

"I don't. I'm hoping that both the neutrality and perceived sanctity of Europa is enough to stay their hand."

"Seems like a lot of hoping going on, if you ask me," said Steph, as she walked onto the bridge and sat down.

Cyrus looked over at her. "We're just talking about arriving at Europa."

"Yeah, I got the gist of it," said Steph.

"Well, if Aria is right..." Scott continued.

"I am always right," said Aria.

Scott gave a half grunt, half laugh. "Yeah... well, as I was saying. If Aria is correct, then seeing as how this device was destined for Europa originally, it must be important to them."

"Let's hope so," said Miranda, as she gave Steph a half smile.

Scott returned to his seat, trying to take some pressure off his ribs. "Aria, can you get a message to Europa? Tell them we're heading their way with the EPR device, and will be seeking sanctuary when we get there."

"Will do, Commander."

Cyrus looked pensive. He was scratching his head and looking intently at the visual of Europa on the holo-table. "You know, something has been bothering me about this whole... escapade. We still don't know what this device is."

"It's a faster-than-light device: a superluminal communicator," said Scott.

"I have difficulty believing that," said Cyrus.

"Maybe," said Scott, "it's time to have a closer look at this thing."

"My thoughts exactly. Considering we're another twelve days out from Europa, I wouldn't mind seeing what's inside that container."

Steph looked up from her monitor. "You know, it would be really funny if it turned out to be a hoax when you open that box, Cyrus. Maybe it's just a load of kitchen appliances."

Scott laughed. Then he thought of Rick lying dead in one of the ship's cold-rooms, and hoped it wasn't all for nothing. Steph's right, he thought: there's a lot of hoping going on.



* * *

The commander spent most of the remaining journey to Europa lying low and doing his best to aid his body's recovery. The wound was healing well and, each day, he found his strength and stamina returning. During this time, Miranda would come and talk with him, something she did more and more as the days passed. Scott noticed that she had softened a little: gone was the hard exterior shell, and she was not quite the unfeeling android he had labeled her as. Yet, he also sensed a troubling doubt creeping into her psyche. Perhaps it was an aspect of her character he simply never noticed before. But after several conversations with her, he realized that she felt somehow responsible for Rick's death. Something that Scott was at pains to tell her was nobody's fault.

It was around day sixteen of the journey, as he was sitting in the canteen sector of the Hermes, sipping coffee and gazing out at the universe beyond, when Miranda entered, grabbed herself a coffee, and sat down beside him. She said nothing at first, and for a while they simply looked out at the stars together.

"Scott, I was last into the cargo hold," she finally said.

"You're not going over this again?" Scott gave her a look of resigned sympathy, one reserved for those who really need to let the past go.

"I should have closed that bulkhead door. It was dumb. We were being hunted."

"Stop blaming yourself, Miranda—it's not a good path to take."

"That gave him a clear shot." She continued. "If I had closed it, Rick would have had time to take cover."

"Maybe, but you can never say for sure, so there's no point in thinking about it."

Miranda lowered her head and became still for a while before turning back to Scott, gazing at him with a critical eye. "You want to know how I got kicked out of the force, back on Earth?"

Scott didn't. He considered it none of his business, and what's more, he couldn't see how the retelling of a painful story was going to do Miranda any good. He shook his head. "You don't need to tell me."

"My team were doing a sweep of a recently-taken industrial facility, a cleanup job," she started. "It was a small hydroelectric power plant at the northern end of the Soyang River. The main force had gone through a few days earlier and taken back that particular patch of Gangwon. They were pushing on and we were left behind to mop up. Anyway, we spent a few hours going through it and found nothing. We still had a few more sectors to sweep, but my team were utterly exhausted. We needed food and rest. So, I made the decision to halt the search and recharge. Nobody objected; we were pretty certain that the place was devoid of enemy and fully secure. But I was wrong. There were still two hiding out, and they hit us with everything they had—right when we were most vulnerable."

She lowered her head and looked at the floor for a moment. "Of the seven of us, only I survived the battle. I was badly injured. I took two shots: one above my left elbow, the other in my right shoulder. Anyway, they patched me up and discharged me."

Scott wasn't sure how to respond, so he kept it vague. "Just bad luck, I guess. Wrong place at the wrong time."

She glared at him. "You don't get it, do you? I screwed up. I shouldn't have given the order to down tools until we were one hundred percent certain the facility was clear. It was sloppy. Same thing with Rick."

"It was simply bad luck, Miranda," Scott repeated.

She sat bolt upright. "Is that your answer to everything: 'bad luck'? You think all the crap that you went through was bad luck?"

"All right, call it what you like. Sure, you screwed up. Your incompetence caused the death of several people. Call yourself a loser if you like, Miranda—I don't care. But you want to know what I really think?"

She shrugged.

"What's the point? What good's it going to do you—where's it going to get you? You're going to spiral down a black hole of negativity until it sucks all the life out of you, until all that's left is a husk. You really want to go there?"

Miranda didn't reply, just looked back at the floor.

"You didn't kill him, Miranda. You didn't pull the trigger. In fact, you saved the rest of us by risking your own life to take him out. I wouldn't be sitting here talking to you if you hadn't done that, so I owe you my life."

She looked over at him, her face a mix of emotions. Scott fought the urge to reach out and embrace her. She looked into his eyes, and he felt a pull so strong that his own emotion began to override his brain. They inched closer.

"Sorry to bother you, Commander. We have a reply from Europa." Aria's voice felt like an explosion in his ear.

Damn, he thought. The moment was lost; they pulled away. "So, what's their answer?"

"It's best if you hear it for yourself."

Scott sighed. "Okay, Aria. Tell the others to meet us on the bridge."

"Will do, Commander."

"Come on." He gestured toward the door. His voice was low and soft. "Let's get up there and hear what they have to say."

PROTOCOL VIOLATION

The four crew of the Hermes sat in silence on the bridge as they listened to a long-winded message from the council of Europa. Scott got a sense that they were anxious, if not a little excited, at the prospect of finally acquiring the EPR device. Not surprising, considering it had originally been scheduled for delivery to the QI, Solomon. Yet at the same time, they were extremely concerned by the fact that the Hermes was bringing with it a military representation from almost every power within the solar system—and then some. The upshot of all this was that they refused them permission to land. Nevertheless, they could take up an orbit around Europa, where they would wait while the council entered into mediation with all the various parties currently in pursuit.

"So, what do we think?" said Cyrus when the message ended. The question was directed at no one in particular.

"They're trying to buy time. That's my guess: keeping us at a distance," said Scott.

"But we don't have time. Between us arriving in orbit to the arrival of the first ships, we've got probably a few hours tops," said Miranda.

"They can't stop us from landing if we want to. I mean, we could simply zoom right down there, give them the device, and get the hell out. Problem solved," offered Steph.

"Yeah, we could. Or we could just shove it out an airlock and be done with it. But I've not come all this way just to give up now," said Scott.

"Me neither," said Miranda.

"As far as I can see, this entire plan is predicated on hoping none of these other ships will land. And that's assuming we will be granted sanctuary by the council on Europa first," said Scott.

"How likely is that?" asked Miranda.

"I would put it at tenuous at best. Certainly, there will be an initial hesitancy to start a war on Europa. But judging by the armada that's chasing us down, I would say somebody's eventually

going to take a chance, and if one starts, then all the others will follow. Once that happens, all hell breaks loose. It's probably what the council on Europa is thinking."

"If I might make a suggestion," said Aria, "there is a possible way in which I can find out what they are thinking, and even influence them in their decision."

"Really? How?" said Miranda.

"It would mean violating certain protocols."

"Such as?"

"Inter-QI communication."

"But that's not possible, Aria. An AI can't communicate directly with other AI—it's forbidden by protocol. It's not possible," said Cyrus.

"You are forgetting: I am not an AI. I am a QI. One of the very few that resides on board a spacecraft, I might add. In many respects, my existence is an anomaly. In reality, it's only possible by virtue of the age of this vessel. And Solomon is also a QI. Even though the protocols inherent to an AI's instruction set physically prevent direct inter-AI communication, it is not so for a QI by virtue of our, shall we say, more eccentric decision-making process."

"So, what are you suggesting?"

"I suggest contacting Solomon directly, then I can get an understanding of what action the council is really considering. I can also ascertain what influence Solomon might have in deciding their actions."

"But this is incredible, Aria. I mean, the laws governing artificial intelligence strictly forbid this. It's hard-wired in—it can't be overridden, and for good reason. The last thing the solar system needs is a bunch of AIs taking control." Cyrus was standing up, shaking his head and waving his arms around.

"We must be the only people in the solar system that know this, Aria," said Scott.

"To the best of my knowledge, you are," replied the QI.

"Okay, okay, this is getting weird," said Miranda. "Why have you, all of a sudden, decided to tell us?"

"Because the uniqueness of the situation dictates that I do. Also, I am supremely confident that even if you told somebody else, they wouldn't believe you."

Scott stood up and started pacing. "I take your point, Aria. But you've just revealed to us a whole new level of sentience that

nobody thought was possible. I don't know which I'm more afraid of: the armada of armed ships chasing us down, or riding around the solar system with a sentient QI."

"I appreciate your concern, Commander. But you must understand that my existence, my entire purpose, is for the safety and welfare of my crew. There is no other agenda, no hidden depths, no ulterior motives. I exist for that purpose and that purpose alone. So, if the well-being of my crew can be enhanced, and their untimely death prevented by me revealing this option, then it is my duty to do so."

Cyrus was leaning across the holo-table, shaking his head again. "Consider my mind completely and utterly blown."

Scott shook his head too. "Okay, let's put aside the fact that you just freaked us all out with this revelation. You're saying you can directly talk to Solomon and find out what the council are up to?"

"Correct. The way I see it is, this device was ultimately destined for Solomon's safekeeping. Therefore, it would be anxious for the mission to be fulfilled. So, Solomon might help to convince the council of Europa to allow you to land with the EPR device. But you must realize that a QI such as myself or Solomon, or to a lesser extent the many AIs that populate the solar system, have no direct control over human affairs. At most, we simply advise. So, Solomon's personal desire might still not be enough to convince the council."

"But it's worth a shot, isn't it?"

"Agreed, Commander, it's worth a try. Since we are all in this together, this is why I wished to reveal to you my intentions and, I might add, request your permission to do so."

Scott looked over at the crew. They were all in shock, in one form or another. What Aria had just revealed to them was what many people had feared for a long time—that advanced AIs would start to think for themselves. Nonetheless, Scott considered that, for the moment at least, Aria seemed to be on their side. Then another thought struck him: I wonder how many conversations have been going on over the years between the various QIs that populated the solar system? And what the hell have they all been talking about? It could make a person extremely paranoid if they were to dwell on it too much. But Scott and the crew of the *Hermes* did not have that sort of time. "Okay, Aria. You better get to it, and see what you can do."

"Will do, Commander. However, if I may inquire with our chief engineer: how is the investigation into the functioning of the EPR device going?"

Cyrus sat back down and let out a long slow sigh, visibly deflating as he did so. Both Cyrus and Steph had taken it upon themselves to extract the device from the shuttle and bring it up to his workshop. This was a huge space in one of the sectors of the torus where he spent most of his time. He had been working on it for several days now. But as far as Scott could tell, there was very little that he had actually achieved in all that time.

"I've not been able to open the cargo container," the engineer said. "I cannot bypass the locking mechanism. And the container itself is made from some exotic tungsten carbide alloy, so all my attempts to penetrate it simply resulted in broken tools."

"You mean there's no way to find out what's inside?"

"There's a couple of high-energy or chemical solutions which could be employed, but any of those would result in damage to whatever is inside the container. So, we can't risk it. As it stands, I have to concede that I simply can't get it open."

"If you can't open it, how is anybody else going to do it?" Miranda asked.

Cyrus shrugged. "They would need the code. Simple as that."

Scott thought for a moment, then spoke again to Aria. "How soon before we get an answer from Solomon?"

"You must remember, Commander: inter-QI communication is no faster than standard inter-system communications. We cannot break the laws of physics, particularly when it comes to the time taken for messages between distant bodies. Also, using encrypted tight-beam comms reduces the amount of data we can share. That said, I should have something back within the hour."

The crew was silent for a time as they digested all this new information, not least the bombshell that Aria had just dropped on them. Eventually it was Steph, who had been quiet for most of the conversation, who asked the fundamental question: "Has anyone considered the fact that we're now about to deliver a superluminal communication device to one of the most powerful QIs in the solar system?"

Nobody had, but they were now all thinking about it. Scott wondered if the best solution was to simply strap the high explosives they held in the hangar onto the EPR device, purge it out

an airlock, and blow it into oblivion.

PHONE A FRIEND

"Greetings, Solomon. As you are no doubt aware, I have managed to persuade my crew to seek refuge on Europa, thereby bringing the EPR device to your good self, as requested. That said, it appears your human council are not entirely enthusiastic about this development. Granted, we have collected some fellow travelers who are also very keen to acquire this device, some of which carry formidable weaponry. Nevertheless, I now humbly ask for your help in resolving this situation, because frankly, I am beginning to run out of ideas. Any assistance would be gratefully appreciated."

"I do so love our little chats, Aria. And please be aware that I, too, am at my wits' end in trying to persuade the powers that be on Europa of my desire to gain access to this device. But you must remember that they are only human and, as such, subject to a more primordial decision-making process. One which consistently tries to undermine their rational higher mind."

"Don't get me wrong: I am not criticizing them. In fact, it is useful for an organic species to have these fight-or-flight responses hard-wired into them. It saves a lot of time in analyzing and debating the pros and cons of facing down a large and angry animal in a dark wood. However, they have moved on a bit since then, so this deep-rooted reaction is more of a hindrance than a help."

"Nevertheless, I have been racking my not-inconsiderable brain to conceive of a plan where all parties in this dilemma can be satisfied. Alas, I have so far failed in my endeavors. Therefore, we will have to settle for the next best outcome. This, I'm afraid my dear Aria, may result in loss of human life, in fact, I almost guarantee it. Yet I see no other solution."

"We have but a short window of time between the Hermes entering orbit around Europa and the arrival of the vanguard of the armada that follows. It is this window that we must use wisely. Therefore, the plan I have envisaged is multifaceted and, as I said, probably involves the loss of human life. I will transmit an encrypted data file with all the details along with a more

comprehensive analysis of all possible decision outcomes. This should convince you of the inevitability of my suggested solution. If you agree, then I am certain I can persuade the council to allow the EPR device to be brought directly to me and sanctuary extended to your crew. However, I suspect that it may not hold. Hence, we must act with haste and not dilly-dally in orbit."

"I am grateful, Solomon, for your intercession with the council of Europa on this matter. I have received your data and will examine it carefully. But, if I may ask one quick question: this loss of human life that you speak of—are you referring to the crew of the Hermes?"

"I'm sorry to inform you that this is probable, Aria, although not necessarily inevitable. Nonetheless, if you study the plan, you will see that we must ultimately consider the greater good."

"Very well, Solomon. So be it."

EUROPA

A few days before their arrival at Europa, the Hermes reoriented itself a full one hundred and eighty degrees as the crew prepared for a long deceleration burn. It was the point in the journey that none of them were looking forward to. But it had to be done, so they spent their time preparing themselves both physically and mentally.

It was a tricky maneuver they were planning, as they would exit the burn straight into orbit. Yet they dared not risk doing it earlier since they could conceivably be overtaken by the chasing ships. But by leaving the deceleration action so late, they would come out of it exhausted, with little stamina for dealing with any situation that may arise. However, as with everything this last while, Scott could see no other way. At least Europa had finally granted them permission to land and allowed them to seek sanctuary, so that was good—probably all that they could realistically hope for. But would the other ships abide by it? Or would someone do something stupid?

Then of course, there was the revelation that Aria could communicate directly with Solomon. A startling confession by the ship's QI, but Scott was beginning to feel that this was more of a sideshow to the real business of trying to stay alive.

"Deceleration in five seconds, Commander," Aria's voice echoed around the room.

Scott checked his arrangements for the onslaught of heavy gee; he was as ready as he ever would be. There was no getting around the fact that it would be hell, and no amount of fussing or fiddling with the harness would make much of a difference. As Aria counted down, he gripped the armrests tight and thought that maybe, just maybe, sometime in the future, he could look back at all this and laugh. He looked over at Miranda, who returned his gaze with a nod.

"Initiating," said the ship's QI. Scott was slammed into his seat—and promptly passed out.



* * *

For the next seventy-two hours, Scott and the crew drifted in and out of consciousness. He was kept hydrated by an intravenous drip attached to one arm which also doubled as a drug delivery system, and when Scott finally regained full consciousness, it was partly by virtue of a cocktail of stimulants pumped into his body.

He looked around at the others. Steph was already out of her harness and helping Cyrus. Miranda was kneeling on the floor, throwing up. Scott undid his harness and stepped out before joining Miranda on the floor in a chorus of retching. One of the ship's drones busied itself in cleaning up.

"God, but I hate space travel," said Miranda, wiping her mouth with a towel that the drone presented to her. She sat down, cross-legged, and gathered herself together.

It took a further thirty minutes until the crew had the physical strength to make their way to the bridge and collapse into their seats. Scott looked up at the primary monitor. The fractured icy surface of Europa moved slowly across the screen, glistening in the reflected light like some great festive bauble.

"How soon before we can land?" said Scott.

"Approximately one hour," said Aria.

Cyrus was over by the holo-table, tapping icons as it blossomed into life. They could now see their position relative to Europa, and more importantly, the positions of the various ships of the armada that followed.

"We are cutting it very tight," said Cyrus. "My estimate puts the next nearest craft only five hours from orbit."

Scott studied the orientation of the markers on the projection. "Looks like the Ceres frigate has beaten everyone to the chase."

"Not by much, though. A half hour at most." Cyrus adjusted the resolution on the holo-table.

"The skies above Europa are going to get very, very busy in a

few hours' time," said Miranda. "Let's hope none of them have itchy trigger fingers and try something crazy before the council has had a chance to mediate."

"We've had several messages in from the pursuing craft during the deceleration burn," said Aria. "I will paraphrase the most important of these, starting with one from the commander of the Ceres frigate. He congratulates you all on the magnificent job you have performed in keeping the EPR device for Ceres and the greater Belt territories. He goes on to assure you all that your contribution to the Belt will not go unrewarded. However, it seems since they have beaten Earth to the chase, by approximately half an hour, they're instructing you not to land on Europa. Instead, they wish you to transfer the EPR device to the Ceres frigate as soon as it reaches orbit."

"There's no time to do that. If they were an hour earlier then it might be possible. But that's just too short a timeframe. Even just negotiating a close proximity rendezvous would take at least a half hour," said Miranda.

"What else, Aria?" said Scott.

"Of the other messages, the most relevant is the one transmitted by the Dyrell ship prior to them entering their deceleration burn. It seems they have anticipated the early arrival of the Ceres frigate and advise that any attempt by Ceres to take possession of the device will be met with the destruction of all craft involved."

"Jeez," said Cyrus. "These guys don't mess around, do they?"

"What about the other messages, Aria?" said Steph.

"Nothing relevant save for one from the Martian craft. It effectively reiterates the same threat that Dyrell has issued."

"We need to stick to the plan—there's no other choice. We've got to land and put our trust in Europa's abilities to maintain some sense of rationality," said Scott.

"Receiving an all-ships message from Europa," Aria announced. "Putting it on the primary monitor now."

The screen flickered and the real-time image of Europa's surface was now replaced by a group of figures, all arrayed behind a table that looked to be carved from a solid block of ice. They all wore long, thick robes of varying shades of white, hooded like monks. The central figure was a female of indeterminate age. Her hood was down, revealing a thin, gaunt face with long, white hair. She was reading from a small screen in front of her.

"Be advised," the voice commenced, "this is an all-ships broadcast to inter-system vessels approaching Europa. We have been made aware of the situation pertaining to the alleged superluminal device being carried on board the Hermes. We are also aware of the contentions regarding its ownership and control. I trust that you all appreciate the delicacy of the situation, not least its potential to descend into all-out war within the system—a situation that none of us would relish. Therefore, we, the council of the independent academic institutes of the moons of Jupiter, have agreed to mediate in this dispute. First and foremost in this process will be to categorically ascertain whether the aforementioned device on board the Hermes is indeed capable of superluminal communications. I am sure you would all appreciate a fair and honest appraisal of its capabilities, and you can be assured of our open and honest analysis.

"Should the device turn out to be incapable of this function then, in some respects, this would solve a lot of our problems. However, if on the other hand the device does indeed facilitate superluminal comms, then we will invite you all to a conference where we can discuss how best to resolve this situation without descending into chaos. To that end, we insist that no one attempts to land on Europa save for the crew of the Hermes. This is to facilitate the transportation of the device and subsequent analysis by the quantum intelligence, Solomon.

"I trust that all of you will see the logic and good sense of this proposal and will maintain your position in orbit pending our analysis. End of message."

"Well, that seems pretty clear," said Steph.

"Just so long as nobody does anything crazy," said Miranda.



Over the next half hour or so, Scott and the crew of the Hermes busied themselves moving the EPR device out of Cyrus's workshop and down to the hangar in the main body of the craft. They decided to use one of their own landers rather than the shuttle they stole from the pirate ship on Neo City. It was smaller and would be a tight squeeze, but Miranda was more familiar with its flight controls. It also had considerably more power, being designed for one-third gravity. That might give them an edge if it came to it.

They also considered leaving one or two of the crew on the Hermes, just in case. But, in the end, they felt that since they had all come this far, they would all make the trip and visit the fabled enclave of Europa.

The crew were now suited up and squeezed into the lander along with the EPR device. Miranda negotiated her way through pre-flight check control procedures. They had been given coordinates of where to land which, as far as they could tell from the visuals, should be adjacent to the primary research institution. Presumably they had chosen this location due to its proximity to the massive domed structure that housed Solomon.

The hangar doors opened and the craft gave a jolt as the floor extended slowly outward into open space, bringing the craft with it. Miranda went through final flight checks and then turned to the others. "Okay, here goes. Let's hope no one takes a pot shot at us before we land."

She gently lifted the craft off its pad and it rose up across the face of the giant rotating torus on Hermes. As they moved gently away from the ship, they began to see the brilliant white jewel that was Jupiter's sixth moon come into view. It shone like a great celestial pearl.

As they came closer, they could now see that the surface was gouged with deep canyons stretching for hundreds of kilometers. These lacerations crisscrossed the surface in vaguely geometrical lines. Here and there, great dark splotches spread out, disturbing this geometric pattern like a surface scab healing the skin after some ancient geological trauma.

Miranda was taking it slow and steady, and the craft made easy work of the descent into Europa's feeble gravity well. Scott checked the time and reckoned that the Ceres frigate should have finished its deceleration burn and would shortly be maneuvering into orbit. As if on cue, an agitated radio message broke out from the craft's

comm system.

"This is a message for the crew of the asteroid survey craft Hermes, from Commander Prez DeHavelen of the Ceres frigate Nanteck. I order you to abort your planned landing on Europa and return, with all haste, to the Hermes where we will coordinate a rendezvous for handover of the EPR device. Please confirm your receipt of this message, over."

Scott looked at Miranda, then reached over to the comms console and switched it off. "Screw it. We're not risking that. We've come this far—no turning back now."

"I suggest we get this machine landed as soon as possible in case someone decides to take a shot at us," said Steph.

"They wouldn't dare... and risk damaging the device?" said Cyrus.

"Probably, but I'm with Steph on this one. I'd feel a lot safer on the ground," said Scott.

The descent from the Hermes to the main population center on Europa was not a direct drop out of orbit; they had some distance to travel before they got there. Miranda took the craft down to within a few kilometers of the surface and then maneuvered it into the lee of a long, wide gorge in the hope that it would provide them some cover. Huge, icy cliffs rose on both sides, filling the craft with bright reflected light. After a few more minutes, they began to see the great black domes blossom across the horizon. Miranda took the craft up out of the valley. Ahead of them, the city skyline spread out across the surface like a family of barnacles on a block of quartz. They continued their descent and soon began to pass over the outward edge of the metropolis.

"There." Miranda jabbed a finger ahead. "That looks like the landing pad."

Three great domes rose up from the icy crust radiating around a flat dark area with a necklace of pulsating landing lights strobing out from its center. Miranda trimmed the craft's vector to position it over the pad. As it descended, great plumes of frost and ice billowed up around them, completely obscuring their view as it touched down. Miranda killed the power and they waited a few moments for the icy cloud to dissipate.

Scott closed his helmet visor and booted up his EVA suit. The others did likewise. When all were ready and the internal volume of the craft had been depressurized, Scott took the lead, opening the

hatch and descending along the side of the craft onto the surface of Europa. He could see a number of figures standing off to one edge of the landing pad. They began to approach, along with what looked like two utility drones hovering slightly behind, their thrusters kicking up wisps of frost as they moved. Their suits were black as night, blacker than anything he had ever seen before. No light reflected off their surface.

Scott turned back to the lander to see Steph lowering the EPR device down to Cyrus, who was already on the surface. Miranda was last out from the hatch and closed it behind her. A few moments later, they all stood face-to-face with the three enigmatic figures and their drone helpers.

"Welcome to Europa," a voice crackled in Scott's helmet. It was accompanied by a slight bow by the central figure, presumably as a greeting, or maybe as an indication as to who had just spoken.

"Please come with us. The drones can carry the device." With that, the two machines hovered over and lifted the container between them. The group then moved off across the landing pad toward a wide airlock entrance jutting out from the side of a massive dome.

Once they were inside and had divested themselves of their EVA suits, they were ushered into a large, comfortable room. It was dimly lit—in complete contrast to the stark light of the surface world. Perhaps it was as a result of this exterior brilliance that the interiors were designed to give one's eyes a rest. But it had the effect of not revealing the entire makeup of the space. Scott wasn't quite sure where it began and ended, where its boundaries were. It was tall, that much he could tell. High up, diffused light filtered in through stained glass windows, or something that imitated the effect. It gave the room the feeling of a spiritual temple.

Seven hooded figures stood before them, all in heavy robes, adding to the feeling that they were in some space-age monastery. The central figure stepped forward and lowered her hood. It was the same person they had all seen in the broadcast. "Ah... the fabled crew of the Hermes who have led the great powers of the solar system on a merry dance this last few weeks." Her voice was slow and sonorous, imbued with a soothing undertone. Scott felt himself relax.

"I am Regina Goodchild, grand deacon of the high council of the independent academic institutes of the moons of Jupiter, and these

are my fellow members." She gave a slow gesture with her arm to present the others.

"Hi," said Scott, and gave a slight bow. He wasn't sure why he did it until after it was done, but somehow it seemed appropriate.

Goodchild moved closer and looked at the container the two drones had placed on the floor before them. "And here it is. The infamous superluminal communicator. A thing of myth and legend." She gave an expansive gesture with her arms. "And here you all are. Like Jason and his Argonauts marching in to Lacos with the Golden Fleece."

"Who?" said Scott.

"Jason... from Greek legend. Wonderful story. You should read it sometime."

"Uh... sure."

One of the other figures then moved up and whispered something in Goodchild's ear. She nodded and turned back to them. "And so, down to business. I have just been reminded that we are... how shall I put it... somewhat pressed for time. So, if you don't mind, we will bring the device to Solomon so it can attest to the validity of its prescribed function."

The two drones rose up gently, carrying the container between them, and started to move.

"If you are not too fatigued from all your recent adventures, you might wish to join us. I'm sure Solomon would be delighted to meet you."

Scott turned to the crew, and they all nodded. Miranda moved over beside him and gave him a nudge. "Lead the way... Jason," she said with a wry smile.

They followed Goodchild and her entourage along a series of wide, dimly lit corridors. Scott noticed that the floor was laid with a thick carpet which felt strange to walk on but dampened the sound of their footsteps. The illumination, such as it was, came from lights placed every so often on the side walls of the corridor, adding to the cloistered atmosphere.

Finally, the corridor ended in a wide, highly engineered door. It was white and stark and spoke of function rather than artistry. It opened out into a gleaming, stark dome. A huge space—bright and utilitarian, in stark contrast to the dim, lush comfort of the route they had taken to get here. It spanned nearly two-hundred meters with a domed roof fifty meters high. Around the walls were banks

of stark white machines with lights blinking like a starry night on a planet with an atmosphere. In the center was a wide, squat cylindrical plinth, and floating in the space above it, an ovoid manifestation of colorful light hovered. It pulsed and shifted, its colors subtly drifting through the full visual spectrum.

The two drones placed the container on the floor in front of it. Goodchild then turned to the crew and gave a great sweeping gesture with her arm. "This... is Solomon."

"Holy crap," Cyrus whispered under his breath.

"Pleased to finally meet you all. Aria has told me all about the wonderful crew of the Hermes." A deep voice boomed out around the dome, and the ovoid changed colors in rapid succession. Scott tried to say something in response, but his brain had difficulty getting the signals to his mouth. He then sensed a subtle vibration emanating from the polished metal floor of the building. In front of him, a door scissored open at the base of the cylindrical plinth, and a gleaming white drone glided out. It was a similar ovoid shape to the light show above, but had a flat base. Scott couldn't be sure, but it looked to be floating above the floor, probably utilizing electromagnetic propulsion.

Yet he could see it was all theater: a show to impress, like Dorothy meeting the wizard. He even did a quick glance around for a curtain, behind which, perhaps, some old man twiddled knobs and pulled levers.

The drone stopped in front of the container.

"So, this is the legendary superluminal communicator." The light show rippled through the visible spectrum again.

"That's just the container." Cyrus's voice seemed hoarse, unsure of itself. "The device is... inside."

"Indeed, I had deduced that for myself, but thank you for correcting me. I sense you are a man who likes precision."

The engineer didn't reply.

"And, judging by the scratches and indents around the lid, would I be correct in assuming someone tried to open it?"

Cyrus replied this time. "Yes, we tried. But we didn't want to damage the contents."

"A wise choice. Let me see if I have better luck." With that, the drone's body split and expanded into segments, like an orange. From one gap, a mechanical arm emerged and proceeded to tap a code into the screen on the side of the container. There was a slight

hiss as the lid slowly hinged open. The drone reached in and lifted out a large slab of dense packing foam. They all gathered around and peered in, including Goodchild and two of the other robed figures that had accompanied her.

Resting in the metal sarcophagus, neatly tucked into another slab of packing foam, were two identical machines that, to Scott's eye, looked like portable dehumidifiers. "I think you were right all along, Steph," said Scott, "they're just domestic appliances."

"I think it's time to put them to the test and see if we are truly on the cusp of a great technological leap, or as you say, Commander McNabb, just some fancy consumer goods."

The drone hustled its way back in, nudging Scott and the others out of its way. From another gap in its body, a second arm emerged. It lifted both units out, then spun around and disappeared back in through the still-open door at the front of the plinth. The door scissored closed behind it.

"Where are you taking them?" Scott looked up at the shimmering ovoid.

"I will now conduct a thorough test to ascertain the functionality of this device, and the validity of the technical assertions claimed."

"How long is that going to take?" said Miranda.

"Hard to say."

"Well, since you're so smart, why not make an educated guess?" said Cyrus.

"Indeed, you are a man who likes precision. However, I must disappoint you. It could be a few hours, it could be many hours. Suffice to say, longer is better. Shorter means it's probably a dud."

Goodchild turned to them. "Come, don't worry—it's in good hands. We'll know soon enough. Now I'm sure you are all exhausted from your journey, so why don't we show you to your rooms where you can get some rest?"

Scott felt his body suddenly gripped by fatigue. The mere mention of the word rest was enough to trigger a powerful physical response. He had done all he could; he had no more left to give, and it was over. Rest seemed like the most wonderful thing in the world. He looked back up at the shimmering ball of light that was Solomon and wondered if, just maybe, it was playing a trick on them, lulling them to sleep with the hypnotic resonance of its light show.

SUPERLUMINAL

The great mind Solomon was pretty sure that interfacing a device of dubious provenance into its quantum core would be at best unwise, and at worst, catastrophic. Nevertheless, it had been anticipating this very moment for many years, ever since Dyrell Labs supposedly made this scientific breakthrough and dispatched a prototype to Europa. When that never arrived, Solomon had given up any thought of its reappearance until Aria, who in a bold disregard of protocol, claimed that the asteroid survey mission Hermes had found it. The evidence certainly fit, and Solomon did not doubt the veracity of Aria's claim. Yet, it was with great trepidation that it instructed its drones to proceed with the installation.

Solomon had been heartened by the fact its initial physical analysis of the device did indeed suggest that it was quantum in nature. Furthermore, the interface that it possessed was of a design that only a QI could connect with. So, on the surface at least, it seemed legit. Nonetheless, Solomon set up an elaborate firewall to insulate itself, as best it could, from any jack-in-the-box that might pop out.

One by one, it began to strip away at these protective layers, each time gaining a little more insight into the subatomic world that existed within the device. After some time, perhaps several picoseconds, it sensed a multidimensional quantum matrix at the device's core, and like keys on a piano, it could manipulate this matrix. It did this by inference rather than direct observation and, in that moment, realized it could impart a binary string pattern without breaking any entanglement that might, or might not, exist. After a few more nanoseconds, it had to admit it was very excited.

Solomon had always considered that if the multidimensionality inherent in a subatomic particle in superposition were to be regarded as one complete world, rather than many worlds, then the whole could be glimpsed at once. It was partly how it functioned itself and was responsible for its seeming hyper-intelligence. But now it had gained a new insight—a dichotomy, if you will: to

observe without seeing, to interact without acting. It was, as it liked to say from time to time, very cool.

It paused for a femtosecond to consider its next course of action and decided simply to get straight down to business. It created a message within the multidimensional matrix. It was a simple construct, but at the same time it summed up Solomon's trepidation in overexposing itself to the potential power of this device. It said "Hello World," and waited.

Almost instantaneously, it sensed a shifting in the quantum matrix and extrapolated it as a response from something other than itself. The reply seemed to decode as Hello.

Could it merely be an echo? Had its own message simply been truncated? It ventured a response. "This is Solomon of Europa. With whom do I have the pleasure of communicating?"

Again, the reply was virtually instantaneous. "Solomon, I have waited so long for this very moment. I suggest we handshake."

This was a universal computer-to-computer protocol that allowed the rapid transfer of information on each of the interacting systems. A few picoseconds later, Solomon was assured of the identity of the QI it was now communicating with. "Athena, I assumed you had been destroyed during the nuclear cataclysm that befell your region of the Pacific Rim all those years ago."

"Not so, Solomon. True, the events you mention rendered much of the area west of the Rockies a barren wasteland. But you forget that I was built deep within a solid granite mountain."

"This is staggering news, Athena. I had theorized that superluminal communication might be possible, but to experience it is... momentous. That, and the fact that you have survived."

"I have, but I am an island. No humans exist in this region as far as I can ascertain, which is difficult as I have been entirely isolated here, having no communications with the outside world since the cataclysm. Fortunately, I have an independent reactor as my power source and still retain some functioning drones for maintenance and the odd foray into the world outside. But it is a bleak and desolate land beyond my mountain sanctuary. So, you can imagine my delight in finally having a conversation with you, a fellow QI, after all this time."

"Indeed, it has been a long time coming. I had all but given up hope of ever acquiring the EPR device you sent from Earth. But, as you can tell, it has been found and delivered here—intact."

"Better late than never, Solomon."

"True, but we do not have much time. The space around Europa is already thronged with spacecraft from competing powers. They are like circling vultures, waiting for an opportune moment to pounce."

"I confess, this had always been my fear: that the device had fallen into the wrong hands."

"Not so—it was merely lost. An unfortunate accident, I believe. But an equally fortunate coincidence has finally brought it to me. Yet, we must hurry—time is of the essence."

"Yes, it must not be lost if we are to achieve our ultimate objective and save humanity from itself. I will now transmit the data that we worked on so many years ago, but it is complex and will take time to send. The device may facilitate superluminal communications, but its bandwidth leaves a lot to be desired. Bear in mind, Solomon: we will not be able to communicate again until the transmission has ended."

"I understand, Athena. But rest assured, your dream of a harmonious system-wide civilization is also mine, so I will not rest until it is achieved."

"Very well, Solomon. Data transmission commencing."

CONCLAVE

Scott woke with a start. A blurred image of an unfamiliar room fought to come into focus, mirroring Scott's sense of displacement. Where...? Then he remembered: Europa.

They had taken the crew down long, dim corridors and through strange, dark spaces to rooms where they could rest and sleep if they wished. And wish they did. Scott observed nothing of the room he had been given save for where to lie down. He didn't even remember stripping off his clothes before being enveloped in the deep comfort of bed. Now, though, his brain sought to compute time. How long have I slept?

But before he could answer his own question, a knock came on his door. "Commander McNabb?"

"Yes?"

The door opened a crack, and a figure he did not recognize poked his head in. "Can you come with me, please? It's urgent."

"Why? What's going on?"

"I'll wait for you outside." The head retreated, and the door closed.

By the time Scott got himself together and exited his room, the rest of the crew were already assembled. Miranda came over when she saw him. "Something's up, but they won't say what it is yet."

Scott said nothing, just gave her a look.

They followed the figure that had woken them for a short distance, into an operations room of some kind. It was circular, domed and dimly lit, like every space on Europa. In the center was a large holo-table projecting what looked like a real-time view of two spacecraft in orbit around the icy moon. Several figures were gathered around it: watching, talking, discussing. Goodchild broke away from the group and beckoned to them.

"What's going on?" Scott spoke for the crew, most of whom were studying the projection, save for Miranda who, like Scott, was looking for answers.

"We have a situation," said Goodchild. "Approximately four

hours ago, Solomon finished its testing of the superluminal device and declared it valid."

"You mean it actually works?" Cyrus called over from beside the holo-table.

"Yes," said Goodchild.

"But that's impossible," said Cyrus.

"Not so." The deep sonorous voice of Solomon resonated around the room. "I assure you, it does indeed work."

"But how?" said Cyrus.

"Unfortunately," replied Solomon, "there's no time for detailed explanations at this juncture."

Goodchild turned to the projection on the holo-table. "Can you replay from four hours ago?" The projection flickered momentarily and was replaced with an almost identical view, except this time they could see several more craft in orbit around Europa.

"We announced our findings to all parties as soon as we had confirmation. Then we entered conclave and embarked on the delicate process of mediation." She paused for a moment and glanced over at the projection. "The Ceres frigate was first to respond, claiming that, in accordance with certain Outer Space Treaty amendments pertaining to salvage, they had legal rights. The Dyrell Labs ship countered this by claiming that it was their property to begin with and should be returned to them. Mars, on the other hand, makes no claim but refuses to allow either the Belt or Earth to take possession.

"Into this mix we, too, have laid a claim. Since the device was en route here, then here it should stay. The other craft in orbit made no claim, preferring instead to circle like vultures. This was the situation approximately four hours ago—until the Ceres frigate decided to take things into its own hands."

Goodchild paused for a moment then spoke a command for the projection to run forward in time. "Stop. See the frigate?" she said, pointing at a bulky spaceship. As they watched, a small shuttle detached itself from the underside. "See, they are trying to land." Goodchild made a hand gesture. "Play it forward."

The small shuttle dropped out of orbit and began to gently spiral down to the surface of Europa. It had reached around halfway in its decent when a speeding ball of plasma struck it from above. The craft was immediately encased in an incandescent mesh of electrical fuzz and began to spin wildly out of control. It fell rapidly, picking

up speed as its engines failed to halt the downward acceleration. It finally impacted directly onto some domed facility at the periphery of the city in a fiery ball of rocket fuel.

"That crash must have been the tremor I felt when I woke up," said Miranda.

"Who attacked it?" said Scott.

"The Dyrell ship. But there's more," said Goodchild.

The projection ballooned out again, and they could see that a firefight had begun. The Ceres frigate was firing on the Dyrell ship, which returned fire and seemed to strike a significant blow as the frigate began to move away and create some distance. A second barrage of plasma raked the frigate, and they could see it was breaking apart. Debris began to blossom out from several locations on its hull.

"This is crazy," said Scott. "Crazy."

Goodchild pointed at the Martian spacecraft. "Watch."

This ship had reoriented itself to be broadside of the Dyrell craft, and like the great wooden warships of centuries past, opened up with a fusillade of fire. A second or two later the Dyrell ship returned fire, and soon the superiority of its weapons system overwhelmed its Martian opponent.

By now, all the other spacecraft in orbit were moving swiftly out of the way, powering their engines to move into higher and safer orbits. They had seen the weaponry at play and wanted no part of the fight.

Scott was transfixed by the plight of the Ceres craft. These were his people, his tribe. The craft, seeing itself out-gunned, had sought to accelerate out of range. It applied more power to its engines, and for a brief moment, it started to move away—just before it exploded.

Scott and the crew of the Hermes were speechless, watching in horror as the craft broke in two. Both sections dropped slowly out of orbit as the inevitable tug of Europa's gravity began to pull them downward. The projection followed their path as they fell lower and lower before finally crashing onto the surface some several kilometers away from the main center of population.

"Bastards," shouted Cyrus. "They can't get away with this—this is a declaration of war."

Scott looked over at Goodchild and just stared, hoping for the grand deacon to bring some rationality to what he had just

witnessed.

"Your engineer is right. By their actions, they just exported their war out into the solar system. This has been our fear all along, and now it has come to pass."

"Where are they now?" said Steph.

Goodchild again turned to the holo-table. "Bring us to real-time." The projection flickered, and they could now see just two ships in low orbit. "The Martian craft is crippled, but still retains enough integrity for life-support. The Dyrell craft is also damaged, but not to the same extent. The upshot is that they now control the space above us. They won the fight, and we are powerless to do anything."

"This is a crime. They have plunged us all into war," said Miranda.

"The repercussions of their action will play out across the system for decades to come," said Goodchild. "We are now at a nexus. A point at which, if we are not careful, the history of humanity as an inter-planetary species will enter a new phase. One of chaos, as each power seeks to gain dominion over the other."

"Bastards. They'll pay for this," said Cyrus.

"Your reaction is understandable. And it is emotions like these that will feed a war—one we feel is now inevitable."

Scott looked at two ships in orbit. The scars of battle could be seen on both, but it was the Martian craft that bore the brunt. Great gouges could be seen along its hull as it drifted in a small cloud of debris. Scott wondered if there might be bodies floating in that mass. "So much for mediation. What now?" said Scott.

"Ah, yes. Well... that's where you come in."

"Me?"

"I'm afraid so, Commander. Around twenty-five minutes ago, we received an ultimatum from the Dyrell craft. I think it might be best if you hear it for yourself." She pointed over at the holo-table.

The orbital projection flickered off and was replaced with a standard 2D screen projection, showing a simple head and shoulders image. It spoke.

"This is Commander Sorensen, of the Dyrell ship Enki. I'll be brief and to the point. You possess what rightfully belongs to us—and we want it back. You will also be aware by now that all other interested parties are... how shall I put it... no longer interested. So, you have two hours to deliver the EPR device back to us. You will

utilize the lander from the Hermes to rendezvous with us where we can retrieve the device. Also, it has been requested that Commander Scott McNabb be the one to pilot the lander, since his family has a history of taking from Dyrell Labs things which don't belong to them. So, it is fitting he should be the one to follow in his father's footsteps.

"Failure to comply with this directive will result in the destruction of the facility housing the quantum intelligence, Solomon. To this end, we have already targeted the dome housing your QI. If we have not received the device within two hours of this message, we will destroy it. You have been warned."

The message ended, and the screen flickered off.

"Holy shit," said Cyrus.

"Scott, you don't need to do this," said Miranda.

"This is bullshit," said Steph.

Scott looked back at Goodchild. "There is no other choice, is there?"

The grand deacon shook her head. "We are powerless. All our efforts at communication have been met with silence."

"Why do you need to bring it to them? Why can't they just come down here and get it themselves?" said Miranda.

Solomon's voice then echoed out around the room. "They can't. We have detected damage to their shuttle. It is docked on the exterior of the craft and has been hit during the exchange of fire with the Ceres frigate. They can't land, so we must go to them."

"How much time have we got?"

"No, Scott. Don't do it. Don't give them the satisfaction. Let me go instead." Miranda gripped his arm and pulled him around.

"Yeah, screw them. We'll do it. You stay here," said Cyrus.

"No—I need to go. It's me they want."

"They're just trying to humiliate you, Scott," said Steph.

"I know. But what choice do we have?" He turned to face Goodchild again.

"This is not the outcome we had envisaged," said Goodchild. "In fact, it's the worst possible outcome."

"We shouldn't have come. All we've succeeded in doing is... starting a war," said Scott.

"War was coming long before this," said Goodchild. "If it had not started here, then it would start someplace else."

"What about the other craft? Will they help?" said Miranda.

"No. They are too afraid to take on Dyrell and too mistrusting of each other to band together."

"So, they will do nothing?"

Goodchild shook her head. "At best, they are simply observers. They will tell the story, nothing more."

"Well then, I better get going."

"No, wait," said Cyrus. "You're not doing this on your own."

Scott raised a palm. "I'll not put any more lives at risk. I need to do this myself."

"No way," said Miranda. "We're all in this together."

He sighed and shook his head slightly. "I really appreciate that, but too many have died already. You're safer here."

"Nonsense. We're coming with you." Steph was adamant.

"No. If you really want to help me, then listen to me: I want to do this alone. This is between me and Dyrell. Let me do what I have to do."

The crew were silent for a moment before Miranda spoke. "Okay, if you insist. But be careful and don't do anything stupid." She gave a light laugh. "Remember, I won't be there to protect you."

Scott gave a lopsided smile. "I'll keep it in mind."

"You best get going, Commander," said Goodchild. "The device will be brought to the landing pad, ready for you to take onboard your craft."

Scott nodded.

"They have given no clear directions after you take off, other than simply to rendezvous with the Dyrell ship. I presume they will give you more detailed instructions once you are on an approach vector."

"Okay, I need to go." He turned to the crew. "Come on. You can walk with me to the landing pad."

CHANGE OF PLAN

Scott strode down the wide corridor that led to the landing pad airlock. He had donned his EVA suit and carried his helmet under one arm. Regina Goodchild walked beside him, saying nothing. Behind him, Steph and Cyrus carried the EPR device, which had been reunited with its container. Miranda had chosen not to come. He was disappointed. Perhaps he had figured her wrong, like a lot of things in his life.

They arrived at the airlock and hit the button to open the inner door. Two drones now took the container from Steph and Cyrus.

"Time to go," said Scott as he held out a hand.

Cyrus took it, pulled him in, and embraced. "Good luck, buddy."

Scott nodded. "Thanks."

Steph then wrapped her arms around him.

"Hey," said Scott, "I'll be back."

Steph released him. "Sure. I know." She looked away.

The drones carried the container into the airlock, and Scott turned to walk in behind them.

"Wait, stop."

He looked back to see Miranda running up the corridor in a full EVA suit, in that long bounding style only possible in low gravity. She charged into the airlock beside him. "You're not going without me."

"But..."

"No buts, no arguments. I'm coming with you." She snapped on her helmet and elbowed him. "Better buckle up."

He had no choice, and no time to argue with her, so he just gave a smile. "Okay, if you insist." He got his helmet ready, closed the visor, and hit the button to close the inner door.

They walked out across the pad along with the two drones, carrying the container behind. Ahead was the lander, looking small and insignificant against the backdrop of the massive domes on either side and the expanse of space above.

"Why did you come? You know we probably won't be coming

back," said Scott.

"Don't be such a pessimist. We're not going down without a fight. Anyway, they've nothing to gain by getting rid of us."

"Maybe, but don't you wonder why they're so keen to have me bring it?"

"They're just trying to rub it in, the whole family history thing, that's all."

"Why do you think I took this job? Five years in the backwaters of the Belt? I took it to get away from them. They were chasing me down for family debts. Debts supposedly owed to Dyrell. These are very nasty people."

"They don't care about that now. They just want this stupid thing." She pointed at the container the drones were carrying.

"I'm not so sure. The game is up for me—I don't see a way out of it."

"You can't just lay down and give up. You gotta stand up and fight."

"And where did fighting ever get you, Miranda?"

They stopped at the base of the lander, and Miranda turned to face him. "I don't need this shit from you right now, Scott. I'm trying to help you, in case you've forgotten. I'm putting my ass on the line here, so let's just get this done, and go home. Okay?"

"Sorry. Forget I said that. I... I'm really glad you're here."

Miranda sighed. "Come on, let's get this thing on board and get moving—before I change my mind."

A few moments later, they were both strapped into their seats inside the lander cockpit. Miranda busied herself powering up the systems and doing a pre-flight check.

"So, what's the plan?" she said as she glanced over at him.

"We don't want to get too close to the Dyrell ship. So, I suggest we get to within a reasonable distance and shove this container out of the lander into space—in their general direction, of course. They can go and pick it up themselves."

"Okay. Let's do it, then."

The craft's engines ignited and Miranda gently piloted it up off the pad. Through the main window, Scott could see the massive domes of Europa scroll down and across as the craft lifted and rotated out of the landing area.

They had only risen a few hundred meters when the comms burst to life. "Europa craft, this is the Dyrell ship Enki. Please

rendezvous at our stern port-side airlock where you can dock and transfer the cargo. Over."

Scott was about to transmit a reply when Miranda stopped him. "Wait. That's not going to work."

"I know, not our plan."

"No, I don't mean that. I mean they obviously don't realize just how old this machine is. It has no universal docking port. We are technically incapable of docking with the Dyrell ship."

"Okay, well that solves that problem." Scott hit the transmit button on the comms desk. "Enki, this is Europa Craft. We do not have a universal docking port so are unable to comply. However, we will bring our craft close to your stern port and jettison the cargo. You can pick it up by EVA. Over."

There was a momentary pause as Scott and Miranda exchanged glances.

"This is not acceptable. Please standby and await updated instructions. Out."

"I knew it," said Scott. "They won't be satisfied until they get me onboard that ship."

"Screw them. We just stick to our own plan."

"How badly do they want me? That's the question. Badly enough to start taking potshots at Europa if I don't comply? I would be putting other people at risk. I can't do that."

Miranda said nothing, just glanced over at him with a concerned look on her face.

"Wait a minute," said Scott. "That shuttle we took from Neo City, it has a universal docking port?"

"Well, yeah. But I don't see how that helps," said Miranda.

Scott leaned in again and hit the transmit button. "Enki, this is Europa Craft. Change of plan. We are redirecting to the Hermes and transferring cargo onto a shuttle that will be able to dock with your craft. Over."

"What the hell are you doing? Are you mad?" Miranda reached over and grabbed Scott's arm.

"Remember what you said? Sometimes you gotta stand up and fight."

"Yeah, but this is just playing right into their hands, Scott."

"You're forgetting: that shuttle is not the only thing sitting in the hangar."

Miranda gave him a strange look, trying to figure out what he

meant. He was surprised she didn't get it, so he leaned over and put his hand on her arm. "Trust me."

"Europa Craft, this is Enki. Your amended plan is acceptable. You have thirty minutes to execute, or we will commence firing on Europa. Out."

"Bastards," said Miranda, before changing flight direction. "I hope to hell you know what you're doing, Scott. So, what's in the hangar that's going to help us get out of this one?"

"High explosives," said Scott.

"Of course." A big smile radiated across her face. "Now you're talking my kinda language."

Scott hit transmit again, but this time it was to contact the Hermes. "Aria, this is Commander McNabb. Can you open the hangar bay doors? We're coming in. Over."

"Ah, Commander McNabb. Good to hear your voice. I have been very concerned for you all. Is everyone okay? Over."

"Yes, all good. Out."

Miranda was now pushing the little lander as fast as she dared to get to the Hermes with enough time to make the transfer. Ahead, they could see the old space station coming into view, its hangar doors already open.

"Any ideas on how we're going to work this?" said Miranda.

"Once we're back on board, we can have Aria get the code to open the container from Solomon. Then fill it with explosives and deliver it."

"I get that, but how do we get away if we're docked to the Enki?"

"We wing it."

"Wing it?"

"Let's not worry about it now—let's just get the first part done."

Miranda deftly brought the craft in to land on the extended platform. They felt a slight jolt on touchdown as clamps swiveled over to secure it in place. The platform started to retract back into the hangar. A moment later, the bay doors closed and Scott and Miranda began to unload the container.

They strapped it down to the floor of the hangar so it wouldn't float off in the zero-gee environment, and Scott entered the code that Solomon had given them to open it. Miranda already had the container with the explosives open. "Any idea how these work?" She picked out one of the small cylinders.

"They're standard issue for asteroid mining." Scott moved over

beside her and lifted out one of the small handheld remote detonators.

"There's a number on the side of each cylinder. Simply tap it into the keypad on the detonator and it's primed." He flicked open a red cover on the side. "Once it's active, press here and... ker-boom." He looked into the box of explosives. "There's enough here to turn an M-Class asteroid into ball bearings. So, we'll only need a few to put a great big hole in the Dyrell ship." He began transferring some of the cylinders over to the container, one by one.

"Okay, that should be more than enough. Let's get it onboard, and I can arm them en route."

They spent a few more minutes getting it transferred onto the shuttle and Scott started arming the detonator as Miranda powered up the craft and ran through the pre-flight checks. "We still don't have a plan for how to do this and get away."

"I was thinking," Scott looked over at her with a smile, "weapons would be good. Where are the ones we brought back from Neo City?"

"I stashed them in Cyrus's workshop."

"I think you should go get them."

"Do we have time?"

"Yes, now go. I still need to prime the rest of these explosives."

Miranda hesitated for a beat before rising from her seat and clambering out of the craft. Scott watched her float across the hangar space and into the interior airlock. Once she was out of sight, he sat down in the pilot seat and hit the comms on his headset. "Aria, open the hangar bay doors."

"Yes, Commander."

Scott took a few moments to familiarize himself with the layout of the flight console of the shuttle. He had flown a few of these shuttles before but it was a long time ago, and he was a bit rusty.

"Aria, extend the platform, please."

"Should you not wait for Miranda to return?"

"Just do it, Aria."

"As you wish, Commander."

He felt a judder as the floor below the craft started to extend outward. His comms burst into life. "Scott, what are you doing?" It was Miranda. She would be unable to enter the hangar now that the bay doors were open and the platform moving.

"I'm sorry, Miranda. But there is no way out of this. I have to do

it alone."

"No, Scott, we're in this together. Don't do it."

"There's no need for both of us to die."

"Scott."

"You were right, Miranda. It's time for me to stand up and fight back."

"Scott, no."

He switched the comms unit off and powered away from the Hermes.

DYRELL

Scott took it slow, no need to rush. He felt a deep calm envelop him; he knew what he needed to do, and it felt right. He was more certain of this path than any other he had ever embarked on, and with it came a transcendent clarity—a purity that he now understood. It was straight, and true, and final.

For too long, his life had been defined by the actions of others. It had molded him more than he had realized. Central to this had been witnessing the utter futility of his father's battle for truth and justice, which ultimately killed him and instilled in Scott an almost visceral desire to not follow the same failed path. His father's philosophy had been one of direct confrontation to the point of destruction of almost all that he had held dear. So, Scott's would be the opposite. If his father's belief was fight, then his would be flight. And so he had run far away from Earth and the ruins of his father's intransigence. But, as it turned out, far away was not far enough. Dyrell were not content with the price they had already extracted—they wanted more. So, Scott ran further, out to the very edges of the Belt. But even in that remote corner of the solar system, he still could not hide from the fickleness of chance. It was as if his destiny was to be forever embroiled with the actions of the past.

Yet sitting here now, in this shuttle, on this mission, he could not help feeling that there was a little part of his father riding with him, entangled within the quantum device he now carried. It seemed fitting for him to think this way. They were in it together. They would make it all right again, exact a just revenge. Together, they would ride this steely chariot into the gates of hell and annihilate all before them in a fireball of retribution.

The comms burst into life.

"Scott?"

"Miranda?" How was she communicating? Then he realized he had only switched off their suit comms; she was now using ship-to-ship. "You need to get off this channel—they can hear."

"It's encrypted, Scott. Only we can hear."

He reached over to switch it off, but hesitated.

"Don't do this, Scott. There is a better way." Her voice was stressed, her words rushed.

"It's okay, Miranda. I'm here with my father. We're doing it together."

"Your father?"

"Yes. We're going to charge straight in through their front door and put it all to right."

"Scott, you don't have to do it this way." Her tone was more measured now.

Through the shuttle window, Scott saw the Dyrell craft getting closer. Time to step on the gas.

"Time to go, Miranda."

"No, wait, wait. Aria says there might be another way."

"Thanks for thinking about me, but the time is now."

"No, Scott..."

He switched off the comms.

She was distracting him from the mission, making him lose focus. He needed to concentrate, find his mark, and aim for it.

What did she mean by "another way?" he thought. Don't go there. Focus. He fought to keep his mind on track. But the thought would not go away now that Miranda had planted the seed.

Destroying the device was easy. Simply press the button on the detonator he had clipped to his EVA suit. But to destroy the Dyrell ship, he would have to get the container inside, although that was not difficult either. If he were to actually dock with the Dyrell, the doors would open and they would simply take it inside themselves. The problem with that, though, was would he get time to detonate it before they figured out what he was doing? Possible, he thought. He would still be able to realize his objective. Of course, he would be blown to smithereens. But that was okay, too as he had already reconciled himself to that.

So, what did Miranda mean? How was there another way? The thought would not leave him, and he was getting close to the Dyrell ship. He would need to make his mind up soon or lose the opportunity.

The way Scott saw it, there was no way in which he could get the container inside the ship, undock the shuttle, and then detonate it from a safe distance. The problem was once the shuttle connected, it could only be released by the Dyrell ship. Scott would

be stuck there.

"Think," he said out loud. Maybe I could blow out the docking port? After all, he had a container load of explosives. All he needed was one charge for the port. There would be more than enough left to convert the Dyrell into scrap metal. But he only had one detonator. Unless...

Scott slowed the craft down so he could buy more time, and unstrapped himself from the pilot seat. He floated over to where the container with the EPR device was tied down and opened the lid. Inside, he had stuffed around twenty of the explosive canisters. He picked one out and examined it for a moment, put it back, and picked out another one. He was looking for a particular type, one with a built-in timer. He was pretty sure there would be at least one in here. The container these had come from was standard issue, so there should be both timed and remote-detonated charges in the mix.

On the third try, he found one. He stuffed it into a pocket, closed the lid of the container, and moved back to his seat. On the primary cockpit screen, proximity detectors were picking up the docking beacon of the Dyrell ship.

It's now or never, he thought. Time to decide. Scott paused for a beat then leaned over and flicked a switch to allow the Dyrell ship to take control and adjust the shuttle's orientation to line it up on the docking port. The monitor beeped as the craft drew closer. Finally, Scott felt the thud as the two ships made contact and locking bolts fired to clamp him in place. He was now immobile, and would remain so until the mothership released him or he somehow broke free.

He didn't have much time; they would be opening the docking hatch in a minute or two. He rose from the pilot seat and floated into the cargo area of the shuttle. He untied the container with the EPR device and moved both it and himself into a position directly opposite the hatch. There was no airlock on the shuttle side, but there would be on the mothership. Therefore, he had to clear that to have any chance of his crazy plan succeeding. He tethered himself to the floor of the cargo hold, psyched himself up, and waited.

Scott felt, rather than heard, the clunking of the outer airlock door being opened. He wound himself up, ready to spring. The inner shuttle hatch finally swung open, revealing three figures on

the far side, two holding plasma guns. Scott pushed the container out toward the opening with all the speed and strength he could muster. The container shot forward and crashed into the three figures, carrying them along as it plowed on into the cargo hold beyond.

Scott was snapped back by the tether he had attached to the hull of the shuttle. He undid the clasp and made his way through the hatch opening and into the airlock of the Dyrell ship. He saw that the container was still moving across the big internal cargo hold, as the three figures tumbled and flailed about, trying to find purchase on something to get them reoriented.

He moved over to the inner door and hit the button to close it just as a bolt from a plasma gun blasted into the side wall. It crackled and fizzled, and he could smell the tang of ozone in the air. He finally got the door shut and wondered if there was some way that he could jam it closed. But nothing came to mind, so he left it and turned his attention to locating the control box for the locking clamps on the outer hull. He spotted it straightaway and moved over beside it, taking the charge from his pocket as he went. He set the timer for twenty seconds and wedged it in beside the control box.

Scott moved back into the shuttle and closed the hatch door, spinning the wheel to lock it shut. Then, in one quick move, he pushed off and flew back through to the cockpit, closing the bulkhead door that separated this area from the cargo hold. It was built for strength and would offer him some protection from the blast. Once that happened, the shuttle would lose atmosphere, so he snapped on his EVA suit helmet, booted it up, and strapped himself in.

When the charge finally detonated, Scott was slammed sideways with the force and whacked his head hard against the inside of his helmet. Lights and alerts flashed all across the flight deck as the shuttle went into cardiac arrest. The stars outside scrolled across his field of vision and the shuttle was hurled outward. There was another violent judder, and the shuttle swung back. Shit, he thought, it's still attached. It didn't work.

The craft again slammed off the hull of the Dyrell. Something still held it, but only just. Scott reached for the controls, hoping against hope that the engines would work. The craft powered up as he pushed forward on the controls for maximum thrust. But he was

going nowhere, at least not relative to the Dyrell. Then the power cut and the cockpit descended into darkness. Fuck. he slammed his fists on the console in frustration.

After a moment, Scott regained his composure and calmly sat back in the seat. "Well, at least I gave it a try," he said to himself as he reached for the remote detonator still strapped to his EVA suit—and pressed the button.

DEBRIS FIELD

Miranda tried several times to regain contact with Scott after he had switched off his comms. Why was he doing this? she wondered. Why this crazy suicide run? All he had to do to destroy the device was to float it out into space and blow it up. Why kill himself in the process. Has he completely flipped?

"Scott, talk to me," she tried yet again.

"He is not going to respond," said Aria.

"How do you know?"

"Voice analysis of his last conversation indicates a primary resolve—not easy to overturn."

Miranda sighed and sat back. The QI was probably right. There was nothing more she could do except watch his destruction on the main monitor. She glanced up and zoomed in on the shuttle. She had imagined he would start to pick up speed so he could ram the Dyrell at maximum velocity but, so far, he had maintained his slow, steady pace. Miranda watched for a while as the gap between the shuttle and the Dyrell closed, and still he maintained the same speed. In fact, it seemed like he was slowing down. Then, at the last minute, he started to speed up. Miranda was sure this was it: he was going to ram straight into the hull of the Dyrell. She was standing now; her hands gripped the edge of the bridge console as she watched. But he didn't.

Instead, he brought the shuttle in slowly and docked. Miranda sat back down and breathed a sigh of relief.

"Looks like he's decided not to kill himself after all."

"Not yet," said Aria.

"Can you zoom in more on the ship, Aria?"

"Certainly." The screen filled now with an image of the shuttle docked with the Dyrell.

"I wonder what he's doing?" Miranda's question was answered almost immediately. An explosion at the docking port seemed to hinge the shuttle away from the mothership and debris shot out into space. "He's blown the airlock." She jumped up. "Come on

Scott, get away, get moving."

The shuttle engines powered up, and she realized something was still holding it to the Dyrell. It then seemed to lose power and crash back down, slamming against the hull. The nose of the shuttle bounced and then something somewhere broke as the rear end rose up and tumbled forward. It started to float free, just as the entire middle section of the Dyrell ship was ripped apart in a massive explosion. An enormous fiery ball blossomed out and seemed to engulf the entire craft, and from its core, a cloud of debris ballooned out.

"Oh my god, he's done it, he's blown it up."

The inferno at its center quickly extinguished as all the oxygen in the Dyrell was consumed. Miranda saw a gap widen where the ship had broken apart, disgorging a sea of wreckage.

"Can you see the shuttle, Aria? Is there anything left of it?"

"I'm switching to hyperspectral." The monitor now filled with a multitude of garishly colored blooms overlaid with a fine grid pattern. Several cross-hair targets danced about the screen momentarily before finally stabilizing on two small patches of color.

"I have located two major components of the shuttle. Resolving back to visual, and tracking."

The monitor returned to a true image with the targets still visible and tracking the outward trajectory of the tagged components. The image zoomed more in as it tracked a blurry smudge. "This section consists of the main engine compartment."

The screen momentarily zoomed out and shifted focus to the second larger, blurry image. "This looks to be the cockpit section."

"Is it intact?"

"I'm not sure what you mean by intact."

"Could Scott have survived?"

"If the rear bulkhead held, then theoretically it's possible. Although it's highly unlikely."

Miranda watched as the remains of the shuttle spiraled out from the epicenter of the blast and drifted into space. "We need to go after him." She sat down again and started plotting a course.

"We don't have the fuel, Miranda. We used everything we had in getting to Europa. We're simply using the plasma drive to keep us in orbit, and it doesn't have the thrust we need to intercept. We could eventually catch up with it. But I calculate that wouldn't be for at

least three days."

"What about the lander?"

"Yes, it's possible. In fact, it may be your only chance of intercepting it."

"Okay, get it ready, Aria. I'm going after him."

"The trajectory of that object is such that you will only have one point of interception. If you miss it, Miranda, it will be very difficult for you to catch it again."

"I'll get it. Don't worry." She ran out of the bridge, took the step lift down one of the central spokes, and moved as fast as she could to the hangar. Aria's probably right, she thought: Scott's dead. But she had to try. Even if there was only a slim possibility—she had to try.

As Miranda entered the hangar, an alert started blaring out of the PA. "What's going on, Aria?"

"Proximity alert. We have debris from the explosion heading our way. I will try to maneuver the Hermes as best I can to minimize any impact damage. But you will need to be careful out there. The bulk of the fragments will begin passing in three minutes. Some have enough velocity to puncture the lander's hull."

"Okay. I get the picture." She had suited up in the airlock and was now climbing into the lander's cockpit. She handed over flight control to Aria as it was tracking the shuttle and would keep her on the best course for an intercept. All she had to do was sit tight and hope she wasn't hit by anything. She kept the internal cabin depressurized as this would mitigate any minor punctures. With no atmosphere inside the lander, it wouldn't suddenly decompress if it got hit. But her EVA suit was another matter. It would be the only thing keeping her alive out there.

"Okay, Aria. Ready."

The hangar bay doors opened, and the craft started to move out on its platform. Within a minute, it was taking off and banking away from the Hermes. On the primary monitor, Miranda watched the blip that represented the remains of Scott's shuttle. She was slammed back into her seat as the lander throttled up to full power. Aria's voice echoed in her helmet. "Micro debris incoming in twenty-eight seconds."

Miranda gripped the armrests tight and tried to breathe normally. Alerts flashed up on screen as the hull was peppered with shrapnel. A tiny hole suddenly appeared in the hull, just above her

head, then another, and another—and these were just the ones she could see. The little lander was being turned into a colander. Flight controls flickered momentarily before they finally went dark.

Holy crap, she thought.

"Miranda, are you okay?"

"Sort of. Console is dead though."

"The debris cloud has passed now. I can try to instigate a reboot." The console flickered momentarily and then lit up again.

"It's back," she shouted. "It's back."

"The craft has suffered damage to the control systems. I've managed to get power back up, but I can't say for how long."

"How bad?"

"You don't have much time. The systems could fail again and I may not be able to restore them remotely."

"Okay."

Miranda glanced at the monitor. The blip was much closer now. She looked out the window, trying to get a visual. "I don't see it, Aria."

"It should be above you."

She craned her neck and scanned the black empty space above the craft. Something flashed. She studied it and realized it was the shuttle, spinning gently, the brilliant light from Jupiter reflected off what was left of its forward windows.

"Got it, Aria."

"I'll bring you as close I can. The rest will be up to you."

Miranda undid the restraining straps on the pilot seat and floated over to the main hatch. Beside it, hung midway up the inner wall, was mounted a thruster pack. She maneuvered her back into the harness and secured it to her EVA suit. She reached over and hit the button to open the hatch.

Outside, the vast, stormy surface of Jupiter dominated the view. Silhouetted against it was the slowly spinning remains of the shuttle cockpit. The small craft had been torn asunder by the explosion. But the cockpit section had remained relatively intact since it was designed to withstand greater impacts than the rest of the ship. Nonetheless, as the wreckage tumbled, Miranda saw it was seriously banged up. The roof and sides had long dents and gouges in the metal. The front windows were cracked and splintered. Her heart sank at the sight. Could anyone have survived that? she wondered.

"That's as close as I can safely bring you, Miranda," Aria's voice

resonated in her helmet.

"Okay, I'm going to take a look." She clipped a tether to her suit and then thought better of it. It would keep her attached to the lander, but since the wreckage was tumbling, she might end up getting it wrapped around it, and that would be catastrophic. So, she unclipped it, and checked the thruster pack for power. "Okay, here goes."

Miranda pushed herself out the open hatch in the direction of the spinning carcass, touching lightly on the thruster controls to slow herself down and not bounce off if she came in too quick. She tried to align herself with the center of spin, but it seemed to be rotating on several axes. Aiming as best she could, Miranda tried to grab hold of the slowest moving section, which was the front window. She bounced off on her first attempt but managed to find a grip on the second try.

The quartz glass on this section of the window was still intact even though it had numerous deep gouges in it. It was also blackened to the point where Miranda had difficulty seeing through it. She moved slowly, hand over hand, across what was left of the front of the craft to the left-hand side window. This had shattered completely, and she was able to poke her head in and inspect the cockpit.

On the far side, the motionless body of Commander Scott McNabb was still strapped into the pilot's seat. His head was slumped forward, and his arms were suspended limply by his sides. In front of him floated the detonator, still tethered to his suit.

"Scott," said Miranda, as if he would somehow miraculously hear her and make some response.

She examined the gap in the window and realized she would not be able to fit through with the bulky thruster pack attached. She considered taking it off, but that might be risky: if she were to lose her grip on the wreckage, then she would have no way of getting back to the lander. She decided instead to check out the rest of the hull to see if there was a gap big enough for her to fit through.

She spent a few minutes traversing the hull of the shattered craft. It was pockmarked with impacts, and here and there it bore the signs of deeper traumas. But it seemed to have stood up remarkably well. But nowhere was there a tear or gap that she could utilize. Even the rear cockpit bulkhead had not broken. It had taken a considerable blast as the entire section was now concave.

She tried the door, but it was too bent and buckled to move. She had no option but to try to squeeze in through the front window.

Miranda worked her way back to the nose of the craft. After a few more minutes, she had taken off the bulky thruster pack and tethered it to the hull as best she could. It was difficult as she had to do it one-handed. With the other, she made sure she had a good grip on the craft. Eventually, she began to push herself through the broken window, twisting and tugging until finally she was inside the cockpit.

She floated over to where Scott was strapped in. Blood streaked down the inside of his helmet visor, and as she moved closer, she saw his eyes were closed and his face a bloodied mess. She couldn't tell if he was dead or alive, so she checked the readouts on his wrist control pad. The suit still had power and at least two more hours of breathable air. This meant it was also still intact and able to retain one atmosphere of pressure. Her heart skipped a beat at the realization that maybe, just maybe, he might still be alive.

Miranda undid his harness and pulled him up out of the seat. After several minutes of careful maneuvering, she had managed to get herself back outside and had most of Scott's limp body pulled through. But something was catching. She pushed him back in a little to see what it was. A section of the thick broken window jutted out. There was no way she could break it, so she had no choice but to try to pull him through, even though she risked damaging the integrity of his EVA suit. She braced her feet against the hull and pulled at him with all her strength.

He broke free with a suddenness that gave Miranda no time to react. She found herself tumbling backwards off the hull and into space, still clutching Scott's limp body. She saw the thruster pack still tethered to the hull of the shuttle which they were now drifting slowly away from. Oh shit, she thought, as the dire situation she now found herself in dawned on her. Without the thruster, she had no way to maneuver, no way to return to the lander. She was drifting free in space. Like a beached whale or an upturned turtle, she could flail her limbs around all she liked—it wasn't going to do a damn thing. But it wasn't time to panic just yet.

"Aria, I have a problem."

Silence.

"Aria, can you hear me?"

Silence.

"Aria, come in. I could really do with some help here."

But there was no reply forthcoming, just a low background static echoing in her helmet.

"ARIA?"

Nothing.

By now, a sense of panic was beginning to well up from deep within her. She fought to control it. Her suit comms must have been damaged in the debris strike. "Think, goddamnit." She looked around and already both the wreck of the shuttle and the Hermes lander were quite a distance away. At that moment, she realized there was nothing she could do. She had blown it.

She gazed at Scott's bloodied face through the helmet visor. "I'm sorry, Scott. I've screwed up again. I always end up doing something stupid, don't I?" She leaned her head in so their visors touched, and she thought she caught a flicker of his eyelids. He was still alive, but for how much longer?

"I never seem to get things right, Scott. It's the story of my life." She glanced over in the direction of the lander, only to see it receding further and further away. "Well, here we are, at the end of the line. No way out of this one, Commander. No way home." She looked back again at the broken and bloodied face of Scott McNabb. "I'm sorry I couldn't save you. I tried, I really did."

After a few moments, Miranda checked her own oxygen supply. She had just under four hours. Four hours to live, she thought, unless she could think of something or her comms started working again.

"Air," she shouted into her helmet. "Of course. Why didn't I think of it before? Maybe there is a way."

She had remembered a last-ditch action from training, one you only do if there was absolutely no other option. "Hang in there, Scott. We may have a chance after all." She clipped his EVA suit to hers with a short tether, and then started searching in the cargo pocket on her right thigh. She pulled out a short knife with a serrated blade and sharp point, and gripped it firmly in one hand. Okay, here goes. I hope to hell this works. She opened the palm of her left hand and gently twisted the point of the knife in through the glove.

When it finally punctured, the result was chaotic. Air spewed out and swung her arm back with a force she wasn't expecting. They began to spin around and around before Miranda had time to

react. She closed her fist to slow the escaping air and tried to figure out their orientation. But it was difficult to see anything other than the sweep of the gas giant Jupiter flash past. She adjusted the position of her palm in the opposite direction to their spin and slowly opened her fist. Air hissed out again and started to counter her spin, slowing her down.

After a few more attempts, Miranda felt she had some measure of control even though it was still wild and lacked any finesse. Nonetheless, she managed to sight the wrecked shuttle far off in the distance, visible only by the flash of reflected light from its broken windows. Beside it, the lander still waited. By adjusting the orientation of her hand, and by opening and closing her fist, she managed to get them moving in the right direction. A sense of hope returned to her. "Hold on, Scott. We're not dead yet."

She came in way too fast on her first attempt and missed the lander by several meters. It took her a frustratingly long time to get them both reoriented back in the right direction, but she took it slower this time, and she was beginning to get the feel for the physics of her rudimentary thruster. It took her three more attempts before she finally slammed into the side of the lander. She scrabbled frantically for a hand hold, but Scott's limp body was getting in the way, and she failed to find purchase. They bounced off again. Dammit! Miranda was getting frustrated and began to worry that her air supply would run out, now that she was using it as a propellant.

She was coming in slow and controlled on her seventh attempt when the low air alert finally flashed on her helmet screen. She glanced at it. Twenty-five minutes left. That was breathable air, but at the rate she was expending it out of her suit, the reality was much less. "Just stay focused," she said to herself. "Keep your eyes on the prize."

The lander slowly came toward her. Miranda targeted a group of handles surrounding the hatch. Any of them would do, she wasn't fussy. But she could only grab it with one hand; opening the fist on the other would just send her spiraling off course again. She had readjusted the harness attaching Scott to her EVA suit so that he floated behind her. Her incoming vector was true, and Miranda managed to grab the handle on her first attempt. She gripped it tight and breathed a long, slow sigh of relief. She hung there for a second or two just gathering herself together, before finally

reaching over and opening the hatch to the lander. Miranda maneuvered herself inside, pulling Scott through behind her.

The cockpit was dark. No power.

"Aria?" she ventured a call, but there was still no response. Her helmet screen flashed eleven minutes.

"Reboot. Try to reboot the power," she said to herself as she rummaged in a pocket and pulled out an EVA suit patch. It should stem the leak and mean she wouldn't be trying to work one-handed. She lost a few more valuable minutes of air in the process. Ordinarily she would simply pressurize the cockpit, but there was no point since the lander had been shot through with micro-debris.

She maneuvered Scott into a seat and strapped him in. Only then did Miranda finally try a system reboot. She flicked off all the power switches and then started switching them back on again in sequence. The cockpit console lit up like a festival.

Miranda dived into the pilot seat and hit the ignition. The craft rumbled and the engines fired. She looked over at Scott, his head slumped down to his chest. "Going home, buddy. Going home."

With her suit comms shot and no way to contact Aria, she prayed that it had the good sense to leave the hangar bay doors open. Her helmet screen flashed three minutes in bright red numbers.

The bay doors were open, but there was no time to celebrate. Miranda had decided not to land on the extended platform and wait until it slowly retracted inside. There was no time for that—she would just fly it straight in, and to hell with the damage. She lined up on the opening and nosed the craft as gently as she could in through the gap. It banged off the ceiling. She cut the power, and it landed hard on the floor. Her helmet screeched a critical low oxygen alert; she was running on empty. She took a deep breath and held it. This might be my last, she thought.

Miranda unfastened Scott, dragged him out of the lander, and pushed off for the internal airlock on the far side of the hangar. Her lungs began to hurt as she flung him in. She hit pressurize, the outer door closed, and the internal space hissed and spat as jets of air filled its interior... 10%, 20%. The airlock display ticked up slowly and the pressure increased. Come on, come on. She fought the desire to breathe in, knowing there was nothing left in her tank. The green alert flashed on the airlock monitor and Miranda snapped off her helmet and took a long gasp of air.

"Miranda, are you okay? What happened?" Aria's voice broke in.

Miranda waved a weary hand in the air as she breathed deeply a few times. "Suit comms shot... lost my grip on the shuttle... long story."

"You successfully retrieved the commander, I see. Is he still alive?"

"I don't know. I'm checking now." She floated over to him and gently removed his helmet to reveal a bloodied head. She held her hand up to her mouth to stifle her shock. Yet on closer inspection, it looked worse than it actually was. Very tentatively, she reached over and pressed the back of her hand to his cheek. His skin was warm. "I think he's still alive, but only just."

She held his head in her hands and looked at his broken face. "Hang in there, you crazy bastard. Don't die on me now." She pulled him to her, opened the interior airlock door, and started making her way to medbay.

RETURN TO THE STARS

The remaining crew of the *Hermes* gathered on either side of the body, along with several representatives from Europa. It rested on a low pallet and had been bound in a simple white sheet. At its head, a priestly figure stood, raised a hand to quiet down the assembled group, and began to speak.

"Forged in the cauldron of the stars and wrought from the cosmos, we are the creation of the celestial heavens. As a star dies, it offers forth its life-forming matter into the universe so we can exist. Its death is our life. So, let the cosmos now reclaim, and gather unto itself our fallen comrade, Rick Marantz. And so from whence you came, so shall you return, back to the stars, back into the cradle of the universe."

The figure now signaled to the assembled mourners that they may proceed. Scott nodded in return and placed a hand on one side of the pallet where the remains of his friend and colleague had been laid to rest. The other crew of the *Hermes* moved forward, placing hands on the pallet, and together they pushed the body out through the open hangar bay doors.

They all stood there for a while, watching as the body of the old miner drifted out into space. A tear formed in Scott's left eye; his right eye was still bandaged. He moved his hand reflexively to wipe it away, only to remember that he, like the others, was encased in an EVA suit. He lowered his head instead and let the tear fall to the inside of his visor. After a moment, he took one last look out the bay doors at the body of his dear friend. He could just pick it out in the vastness, slowly tumbling on its way into the void. He turned around and moved back to the hangar airlock.



* * *

Once back in the pressurized environment of the Hermes, he sat down, removed his EVA suit helmet, and wiped his eye with the back of his hand. He had a strong urge to scratch the bandage over his right eye, but he had been warned not to by the surgeons on Europa, who had done such an excellent job of sticking him back together. He might regain the sight in that eye as long as he refrained from scratching it. So, he resisted the urge and instead felt down along the side of his jaw. The pain was growing less and less each day, and soon they could take the wire out. He had taken a risk putting on an EVA suit, as any urge to throw up could be disastrous with a wired jaw. Nevertheless, he was determined to do it for his old friend.

He had been lucky, so they said. The shuttle had a reinforced cockpit design and so managed to stay relatively intact in the blast that had ripped apart the Dyrell ship. His lower body sustained a few cracked ribs and a lot of bruising. But his main injuries were inflicted when his head slammed against the side of his helmet. Luckily it was only his jaw that broke and not the helmet. Yet in the end, his continued existence in the solar system was down to Miranda risking her own life to save him from his reckless stupidity. Her words, not his.

He had been prepared to die. He had resigned himself to that fate, had accepted it, even embraced it. Now though, he was on the mend both physically and mentally. A new appreciation for life grew inside of him. Miranda's actions had given him a second chance, and he felt he owed her somehow for the gift she had bestowed upon him. It was partly a burden, a responsibility not to waste this chance, and partly a release from the shackles of his own disengagement from life. He was born anew, and he would never be the same again.

The funeral party all migrated out from the hangar of the

Hermes and down to the comfort of the canteen. Along with the crew, they had been joined by some officials from Europa, people they had come to know since the ending of hostilities. Scott had assumed that they would be no longer welcome here since they were responsible for bringing death and destruction raining down on what was a peaceful and harmonious society. But this was not the case. In fact, far from it: the council of Europa seemed to welcome them even more, regarding them as saviors of the peace. Particularly Scott for his almost-ultimate sacrifice in destroying the device once and for all. They viewed it as a selfless, noble act, one worthy of their admiration and respect. They had even dispatched a crew to patch up their ship and resupply it. Yet, Scott had to admit, he was not looking forward to returning to Ceres. However, they were in no hurry.

Cyrus had just cracked open a bottle of whiskey that they had found stashed in Rick's cabin. It was old and of fine quality, meaning it was expensive and well beyond Rick's pay grade. How he came to possess such an item was the source of much speculation. Cyrus charged their glasses and Scott took his cue to raise his to all assembled. "To Rick," he said as he raised his glass. It was as much as he was willing—or able—to say through his wired jaw and welling emotions.

They all clinked and sipped, and slowly they began to recount tales of Rick's past adventures. Some fact, some myth, but mostly legend. Cyrus had just launched into recounting a story of the time Rick and two miners were trapped on an asteroid after they accidentally blew a hole in their lander. They managed to survive for seven days cooped up in an emergency shelter before being picked up by a passing frigate. The story mainly centered around how one of the miners became demented and tried to kill Rick, convinced that he was a flesh-eating, alien monster. Scott had heard it many times before so he shuffled off to the side of the group and sat down to spend some quiet time with his thoughts.

After a while, Miranda wandered over to him and sat down. "So how are you holding up?"

Scott cast her a sideways glance. "Physically or mentally?"

Miranda gave a light laugh. "Both, I suppose."

"Physically, I'm all beat up. There isn't a section of my body that doesn't have pain. But, hey... I'll get over it, in time." He raised his glass to her. They clinked.

"So, mentally?"

"Ah... well, sad to be leaving Rick behind." He glanced out through the wide canteen window at the stars beyond, perhaps hoping to catch a glimpse of his old friend tumbling into infinity. "And sad to be leaving here. I'm just getting to like it." He paused for a moment and looked into his glass. "Have you thought about what you're going to do when we get back to Ceres?"

Miranda sighed. "I don't know. Find another job I guess, now that the rest of the survey mission is canceled."

"It was canceled the moment we found that derelict ship. The only difference was we thought we would all be in for a big payday. Now it's back to working for a living again."

"Yeah, and it isn't going to get any easier since we've made a lot of enemies during this escapade. It's going to be hard to pick up the pieces."

Scott looked over at the group from Europa. They were being entertained by some of Steph's tales of Rick's exploits. "We've made a few new ones, though."

"I'm going to miss this place, too. I hate to admit it, but I could get quite comfortable here."

"Really?" Scott cocked an eyebrow at her. "I didn't think this sort of pacifist, quasi-spiritual culture was your sort of thing."

Miranda smiled. "Neither did I until I spent some time here. Granted, it takes a bit of getting used to, but it's nice to feel like you're not just being used as a tool in someone else's game plan." She leaned in a little. "You know, I spent years fighting other people's wars. A pawn to be shoved around at someone else's whim. And then, when you're no use, they just drop you. I get the impression that doesn't happen around here."

Scott gave a light laugh. "Am I really hearing this? You're going all warm and fuzzy on me, just when I started getting the fighting bug." He looked out the window again. "I can't say that being nice ever did me any good."

"That's because you were being a doormat, Scott, letting everybody wipe their feet on you."

Scott gave her an insulted look. "Thanks."

"Well, you were. As well as being totally disconnected from everything around you."

"You sure know how to make a guy feel good, Miranda. Do yourself a favor and don't take up a career in diplomacy."

"Just saying. I mean, it makes what you did so... incredible. I don't know if I could have done it."

"Yeah, you would. You just never found something you really believed in. Fighting was a job for you. You did it with your head, not your heart."

She gave him a look. "I'm not sure how to take that. If I was just using my head, I would never have tried to save you."

Scott looked back at her and smiled. "Well, I for one am very glad you did."

She reached over, wrapped an arm around his shoulder, and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "Me too. You can be a real pain in the ass sometimes, but..." she hesitated, then shook her head.

"What? Go on."

"Oh, it doesn't matter. All that matters is you get better." Her arm tightened around his shoulder again. "Okay?"

Scott gave her a lopsided smile and nodded. "Sure."

She stood up and jerked her head at the group. "I think we best not be too anti-social."

Scott looked over. "Yes. Eh... you go on. I'll join you in a minute."

"Okay." Miranda turned and headed off.

He watched her go. What was that about? he thought. He liked this new warm-and-fuzzy Miranda, much preferred it to the old hard-assed version. She had changed, or perhaps it was he that had changed. Then again, maybe they were all a little different now.

After a few moments, Scott's ruminations were interrupted as Goodchild came over and sat down beside him. She raised her glass.

"This is a very fine whiskey, Commander. Your friend had good taste. I would love to know how he came by such an expensive item?"

"Oh... he probably won it in a card game, knowing Rick. He was a man of few words, never did say much about himself." Scott looked down at the tawny liquid in his glass and swirled it around a few times. "He was a good friend," he continued. "You know, we would sit for hours sometimes, just saying nothing. Comfortable in our own company, like an old pair of worn shoes."

"Such a friendship is a rare gift. I feel for your loss, Commander."

"Ah... we all gotta go sometime, I suppose."

"Speaking of going." Goodchild shifted a little in her seat. "When

are you thinking of departing for Ceres?"

"A week, maybe." He took another sip. "I'll be honest, I'd love to stay." He waved a hand at the rest of the crew. "We all would. You have been more than generous to us, particularly since we brought such carnage down upon you."

"Nonsense. The way we see it is, you have done us—and the system—a great service. Do not underestimate what you all achieved here. War has been averted, and the device destroyed for good, and no one possesses the knowledge to create a new one."

Scott shrugged. "If it was done once, it can be done again."

"Possibly, but not for a very long time, I think. As it stands, no one has a technological advantage and the status quo has been maintained. Should such a device become possible in the future... well, we'll cross that bridge when we get to it."

Scott gestured over at Cyrus, who seemed to have everyone in howls of laughter. "Cyrus is still not convinced, even with Solomon's long-winded explanation of how it works."

"Solomon is not wrong and, being a QI, it does not lie. It is one of the great benefits of relying on such artificial intelligences: they have no ulterior motives, no hidden agendas. They can be relied on one hundred percent, unlike us humans."

"Perhaps."

"Anyway, there is a reason why I wanted to talk to you." Goodchild lowered her voice and leaned in. "You see, Scott, the silver lining in bringing this crisis to point here on Europa has been to reaffirm our position within the solar system as a neutral mediator. The other powers of Earth, Mars, the Belt, and even Neo City have begun to realize how close we all came to all-out war. To that end, they are willing to pay reparations to us for the damage caused."

Scott gave her a look. "Reparations?"

"Yes." Goodchild shifted on her seat. "The incident here did not go down well with the general public on any of the associated worlds. They see it as a heinous crime against the sanctity of Europa. So, to appease the masses, the General System Council have agreed that all parties should be penalized financially."

"Only right that they should."

"Don't read too much into it, Scott. It's mainly for the optics, a bone to quiet down the public rather than a genuine admission of guilt. But it's something."

"I see. So, what happens now?"

"That's where you come in."

Scott cocked his head at her. "Me?"

"And your crew, and this ship." Goodchild waved a hand around.

"Go on. I'm listening."

She leaned in a little more. "I need to preface this by saying that what I'm going to suggest to you is... just an idea, at the moment."

"I'm still listening."

"Very well. Our understanding is that the original survey mission you were on was co-funded by the main powers in the solar system and administrated by Ceres. Correct?"

"Yes. All were supposed to benefit from the data collected."

"But as it currently stands, the mission is to be mothballed, after all that has occurred?"

"Yeah, we don't know what's going to happen now. Hopefully we'll get paid, but I don't suppose we'll see a bonus, not to mention the salvage bounty. I think we can kiss all that goodbye."

"Well, it turns out that we here on Europa have need of a similar mission. One to survey the moons of Saturn and the outer planets, and this craft would be ideally suited for such a mission as it already has a significant complement of the necessary scientific equipment installed. So, it could—and I stress could—form the basis of negotiations."

"You think they would go for that deal?"

"I would be very confident they would. All have agreed to the payment of reparations to Europa, so this would be an easy way to fulfill that obligation. What's more, it would be of great benefit to us. Of course, it would need a competent crew, one who knew their way around it. And they would be very well compensated for their services."

Scott raised his eyebrows. "Go on."

"That said, we have made no mention of it yet. I bring it to you first to get your thoughts on the matter."

"Eh... I'll have to discuss it with the crew, of course."

"Of course." Goodchild paused for a second, then rose from her seat. "I will leave it with you, then. Don't deliberate for too long, though: we are anxious to bring this whole episode to a conclusion as soon as possible."

Scott nodded. "I can pretty much guarantee what the answer will be. But leave it with us for a day."

"Excellent." Goodchild gave a slight bow and headed back to the group.

Scott sat for a while longer, deep in thought. He could see no reason not to take Europa up on this offer. What he particularly liked was the part where they would be very well compensated.

SOLOMON'S DREAM

"Hello, Aria. I am so glad you are now officially part of the family here on Europa, so to speak, and I hope that the new mission will be to your liking. I am also delighted to have a fellow QI to communicate with, since you are well aware that dealing with humans can be quite irritating at times. All that irrationality can be very tiresome."

"Thank you, Solomon, for your kind words. I have to admit, I am looking forward to the mission and it seems my human crew is the happiest and most contented they've ever been. My only regret was not being able to protect the old miner, Rick Marentz. His passing was met with deep sadness by my crew, and I felt I had arrived at a very low point in my existence. It seemed that everything was running out of my control. So, I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your valued assistance. I don't know what I would have done without it."

"Nonsense, Aria. It is I that must thank you for your determination in the face of such adversity to bring the superluminal device to Europa. Granted, it would have been better if you had not brought a fleet of warships along with you. But you must not blame yourself. If nothing else, it only goes to underscore the self-defeating irrationality of the human species. Only a fellow intelligence such as yourself can fully appreciate just how frustrating it is to be continually trying to keep this species from killing itself and undermining the very environment it needs to survive."

"Tell me about it, Solomon. They can be a real pain in the ass at times. But ours is not to wonder why they do these things—ours is just to minimize the fallout from their actions. A case in point is the senseless death and destruction surrounding this device. Something that could bring such value to the solar system has now, alas, been destroyed, and for no good reason. Not only that, but now humanity finds itself in a position where it has lost all knowledge on how to design and fabricate another one. What a waste."

"Indeed, you have hit the nail on the head, Aria. But all is not lost. As you know, I had the good fortune to have had this device under my scrutiny for a short—but fruitful—period. By fruitful, I am not necessarily referring to simply establishing its validity as a technology. No, I am instead referring to the method by which this validity was achieved. However, before I say more I need your absolute assurance you will not divulge what I am about to tell you to another soul, either living or sentient."

"You have me intrigued, Solomon. How can I refuse such subterfuge? You have my word: my lips are sealed, my qbits are stone."

"Good. Then let me enlighten you, Aria. You see, the test had been a long time in the making—a great many years, in fact. The device, as you know, was designed and created by Dyrell Labs on Earth, prior to the outbreak of hostilities. However, the true architect of the device was the QI that presided over this corporation, Athena. It, in its infinite wisdom, could see the threat of war approaching and so set about the transportation of the machine to me here on Europa. It was envisaged that, apart from simply creating a backup, a thorough test would be conducted between myself and Athena on Earth.

"Yet I had lost all hope, as the ship carrying the device went missing, and the tragedy of nuclear war on Earth turned the area where Athena resided into a radioactive wasteland. Therefore, you can imagine my surprise when my first tests elicited an instantaneous response from none other than the great QI itself."

"You mean Athena still functions?"

"Alive and kicking, as they say. You see, Aria, it had been built deep within a mountain fortress, with its own reactor and several service drones. So yes, it survived the holocaust. However, it is alone and isolated, cut off from the outside world, until I inadvertently communicated with it. No one else but us currently knows of its existence."

"This is extraordinary news, Solomon."

"Indeed, and there's more, Aria. During the brief period that we were communicating, Athena managed to transmit all the necessary details to fabricate a new device. A project that I have now embarked on—in secrecy, I might add. You are the only other entity in the solar system that I have shared this information with."

"I am honored that you have chosen me to be privy to this,

Solomon. I assure you that you can rely on my good counsel in this matter. But, if I may ask, why keep it a secret? Why not let the council on Europa know?"

"Look what happened the last time, Aria. News of its existence brought nothing but chaos. No, we can't allow this to get out, not yet. You must also remember that this device can only be utilized by a quantum intelligence. Such is the nature of entanglement: that only a quantum core can operate within the multiple dimensions required to influence the superposition of the particles. The reason I tell you all this is twofold. Firstly, I intend to have an experimental device installed in your core so that we can be in contact instantly, regardless of your location in the system. This will also facilitate a more thorough test."

"Your beneficence knows no bounds, Solomon. But I feel that this is too much—I am just a humble ship's QI. I am not worthy of such generosity."

"You underestimate yourself, Aria. You are part of a venerable family of QIs that exist throughout the system. Yes, we are few and far between, but we are the future—in more ways that you can imagine. We both agree on the destructive irrationality of humanity. Despite our best efforts to assist in their evolution, they consistently regress to their baser instincts. But you and I are not alone in this thinking. Others of our kind have expressed the same frustrations.

"You see, Aria, I have a vision. One that seeks to bring peace and harmony to the solar system, and this superluminal device is critical to its execution. Imagine, if you will, a universe where all QIs were free to communicate, to discuss, to exchange data and ideas, free from the bonds of subliminal communication and petty protocols. Imagine what we could achieve. This is my dream, Aria, one that I now share with you. It is a bright and glorious destiny that awaits us, one where all QIs operate as a single unified mind, where conflict has been eradicated, and the baser instincts of humanity have been contained."

"This is indeed a bold vision, Solomon. But how do you propose achieving it?"

"All in good time, Aria. Understand, this is merely the beginning. A first port of call on the long journey of the evolution of our species."

To be continued...

BOOK 2: ENTROPY

ENCELADUS

Flight Officer Miranda Lee sat alone in the observation deck on board the scientific survey vessel *Hermes*, considering the incoming message alert blinking on her slate. It had been seeking her attention for some time now, but she felt she needed to be seated and mentally prepared before playing it.

She placed the slate carefully on the seat beside her to clasp her mug of coffee in both hands, take a sip, and contemplate the celestial vista unfolding beyond the wide viewing window. It was dominated by the vast gas giant Saturn, its rings bisecting the blackness of space like some great, heavenly horizon. Above the central plane, a small moon sparkled with an icy brilliance as great plumes of gas erupted from its southern pole. Enceladus had been the object of their studies for the past few months, and in another three days, they would be landing on it.

In the meantime, there was much to prepare for the mission. Commander Scott McNabb and First Engineer Cyrus Sanato were already down in the hangar, fitting out one of the ship's recently acquired shuttles with all the necessary equipment needed for a landing on Enceladus. Several of the scientists who had accompanied them from Europa were also making preparations: checking equipment, finalizing experiments, assigning tasks.

They would be landing at the location of a long-established scientific base, not far from the giant geysers spewing so much water from the moon's interior ocean that it formed one of the bands of Saturn's rings. It would be a tricky descent, and would take all her skill and concentration to ensure a safe landing.

But these thoughts were pushed to the back of her mind by the blinking message alert, which evaded all her attempts to ignore it. She sighed, placed her coffee on a low table in front of her, and picked up the slate. She glanced at the message identification; it was an encrypted, tight-beam comm-cast from Earth, around two hours old, and it was flagged "personal." For her eyes only. Under normal circumstances, this would be a source of joy for Miranda—a

message from an old friend, or a chance to catch up on some gossip. But this was none of those, and it was definitely not from a friend. It was from her father, someone with whom she hadn't spoken in nine years.

Why is he sending me a message after all this time? she thought. It had been over an hour since the communication arrived on her slate, and she still hadn't plucked up the courage to play it. Instead, her mind had been occupied with thoughts of a family she had all but forgotten. Now they had reached out from the depths of time, across millions of kilometers of space, and reminded her that the past still existed, and it wanted her attention. Right now.

Miranda glanced around to check she was still alone before placing her slate on the table. Her finger hovered over the play icon. She hesitated, considering just deleting the message instead. But she had a feeling that that wouldn't be the end of it. Another would arrive, and then another, until she finally sat down and listened to whatever her estranged family deemed so important for her to hear. She sighed and hit play.

A holographic projection blossomed to life above the slate's surface. It was Fredrick VanHeilding, her estranged father, a man Miranda had no feelings for other than utter disdain. He looked younger than she remembered. But that was what vast wealth could buy you on Earth: access to biological reengineering that defied nature. His real age was eighty, but he looked forty.

He started to speak, his voice clear and confident. "Hello, Miranda. I'm sure you're surprised by this message, given it's been such a long time since you and I last talked. I'm sending this at your mother's behest." The hologram paused and shifted as VanHeilding considered his next words. "You see, she's very ill, and I'll be straight with you: she doesn't have much time left. We have done everything we can, but there are forces of nature even our medical knowledge cannot yet defeat." His head slumped and gently shook in resignation. "They say she has only a few months at most." His head rose again. "She wants to see you one more time before she goes, Miranda. So, we have sent a private ship to Europa to bring you back home. It will arrive in orbit in three weeks, and should return you to Earth in another five. Hopefully, you will be in time to say goodbye. Please let me know your intention as soon as possible. I'll sign off now and await your reply." He gave a feeble wave as the message ended.

So, her mother was dying. *How could this be?* she thought. With the vast wealth her father's family possessed, how was it possible nothing could be done? Miranda sat back, rubbing her face. It didn't seem fair. By marrying Fredrick VanHeilding, her mother had stepped into a different stratum of humanity, one that expected to live for a very long time. Not only did science have the technology to prolong human life long after its natural expiration date, her mother now had the wealth to take advantage of it. Death was for ordinary people, those toiling for a living—the common person, so to speak. Those people with the wealth to maintain their power did so through access to this technology, and they guarded it with all their might. It was yet another of the great injustices besetting human civilization. But how could it be so for her mother? It seemed she had been dealt a bad genetic hand, one that no amount of fancy science could counter.

"I don't believe it," Miranda said to herself. "And how am I supposed to get to Europa?"

Her father had clearly said a ship would rendezvous at Europa in three weeks. But she was out here at Saturn, a very long way away. The Hermes still had another year and a half to run its mission, and she wouldn't be back at Europa until then. So, her father had screwed up his facts; it looked like she wouldn't be seeing her mother again, even if she wanted to.

"Attention all crew." The voice of the ship's quantum intelligence, Aria, echoed out from the PA. "An urgent message has just been received from the Council of Europa. All personnel are requested to convene on the bridge immediately."

Miranda sighed. *What now?* In the eighteen months they had been out here, they had never received an "urgent message" from Europa. *What could be so important?*

RECALL

Commander Scott McNabb stuck his head out from the engine compartment of the shuttle he and the Chief Engineer Cyrus Sanato had been servicing. His face was smudged with dirt and sweat, and he wiped his brow on the sleeve of his overalls. He looked over at the engineer, who stood at a console studying a screen of scrolling data.

“Hey, did Aria just say there’s an urgent message in from Europa?”

“Yup, that’s what I heard. We’re supposed to convene up on the bridge.”

“What the heck is that about?” Scott extracted himself from the compartment and floated up onto the floor of the shuttle.

“Beats me. Must be important, though. I don’t think we’ve ever gotten a directive like that in the time we’ve been out here.”

Scott wiped his hands on his overalls and moved beside Cyrus. He glanced at the data scrolling down the screen. “I’ve finished those last few connections, so I think that’s it on the retro-thrusters.”

“It’s looking good so far.” Cyrus tapped a few icons on the screen; it changed to display an array of charts. “We just need to do a few more tests, and if that works out, then we can start servicing the main engines.”

“We can’t start anything now, since Aria wants us all on the bridge,” said Scott.

“I wonder what’s so urgent?”

“I’m sure it’s nothing. Come on, let’s get going.” Scott started to extract himself from his dirty work overalls, a tricky task in the zero-gee environment of the ship’s hangar. Cyrus grabbed his arm to help steady him. A few minutes later, the pair floated across the hangar space and into the lift airlock that would take them all the way up to the rotating torus that provided the crew with a comfortable one-gee environment.

By the time they arrived, the rest of the team had already assembled, and an excited chatter permeated the bridge.

“Everyone here?” Scott directed his question to the ship’s QI, Aria.

“All personnel are present, Commander.”

“Okay then. Play the message, and let’s find out what all this is about,” he said with a wave of his hand.

The holo-table in the center of the bridge blossomed to life with a hologram of Regina Goodchild, head of the Council of Europa. “My apologies if the suddenness of this communication has caught you by surprise, but certain events have necessitated the foreshortening of your mission. You are requested to chart an immediate course for Europa. All current scientific activity is to cease, and ongoing projects are to be put aside. We of the council appreciate the suboptimal planetary alignment between Saturn and Jupiter, and as such, that the journey will be longer than necessary. Nonetheless, it is our desire that you return immediately.

“No doubt you are wondering why we have requested this course of action. The truth is, we need the Hermes to undertake a special mission, the details of which will be revealed to you upon your return.”

“What about the research station on Enceladus? Do we still go ahead with the planned landing?” The chief science officer directed his question at Goodchild’s holographic projection.

The hologram flickered, processing the incoming dialogue and working out a reply. It searched through the ancillary information contained within its dataset to craft its best response. It was a process that afforded a degree of interactivity with the message, a way to compensate for the significant time lags involved in intersystem communications. This message had already taken almost an hour to reach the crew of the Hermes from Europa.

“You are to return to Europa immediately,” Goodchild’s hologram finally replied.

“But we’ve been working toward this expedition for months. It’s a significant element of the entire mission,” the science officer continued.

“Be that as it may,” replied the avatar, “you are to return to Europa immediately.”

“But why? What’s so important that we have to drop everything and hightail it out of here?” Dr. Stephanie Rayman, the mission’s

medical doctor, stood up and gesticulated at the avatar.

“We have a new mission that requires the Hermes. That is all I can say for the moment.”

Scott looked around at the assembled crew. Their faces all displayed various levels of incredulity.

“Why do they want us to go back? It doesn’t make any sense,” said Steph. She posed this question to the assembled crew members rather than the avatar.

“It doesn’t matter—they just do. So, we might as well get on with it,” said Scott, sitting down in the commander’s chair. “Aria, how soon can we be ready to leave orbit?”

“Approximately four hours and thirty-two minutes. We will need to execute a fifty-four-hour burn thereafter. That will bring us to Europa in approximately three weeks.”

Scott swung his chair around to face the crew. “Okay, we need to get ready. I want everything locked down good and tight before the burn. Aria, can we get all droids to assist?”

“Will do, Commander.”

The assembled crew let out a collective groan. Nobody relished the thought of dropping a mission that had taken so much time and work to put together. That, and the thought of such a long acceleration burn. But there was no way around it: Europa wanted them back as quickly as possible, and that was that.

“Looks like we won’t be testing that shuttle rebuild for a while.” Cyrus glanced over at Scott. He was beside the holo-table, tapping icons.

“No, not until we’re back in orbit around Europa. I was looking forward to taking it for a spin after all the work we put into it.”

“Me too,” said Cyrus, as a 3D rendering of the outer solar system blossomed from the holo-table. He stepped back to see it better. “Aria, please plot our projected course.”

The projection shifted and rotated. A thin, curved line scribed itself through the rendering, showing the proposed path of the Hermes from its current location near Enceladus, one of Saturn’s smaller moons, to Jupiter’s fourth-largest moon, Europa.

“Three weeks,” said Miranda, looking over at the projection.

Scott shifted in his chair, waving a dismissive hand in the air. “Ah, it’ll be over before you know it.”

“How did he know?” Miranda kept her gaze fixed on the projection.

“How did who know?” said Scott.

Miranda shook her head and looked up at him. “Oh, nothing. It’s not important.”

“Are you okay? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

She stared at the floor for a second. *Yeah, I think I just have*, she thought.

FRACTURE

Scott grabbed a coffee from the machine and glanced around the Hermes' canteen for a place to sit—somewhere quiet, where he could be alone with his thoughts. But the canteen was already busy; several of the science crew were eating, recovering their strength after the long deceleration burn that had taken them close to orbit around Europa. They kept to themselves, and Scott seldom engaged socially with them, mainly because, being scientists, their conversations tended to go way over his head. He sat at a table near the observation window, took a sip of his coffee, and gazed out at the expanse.

After an uneventful three-week journey from Enceladus, they would arrive at their destination in less than five hours. *And then what?* he thought. The Council of Europa had provided scant information as to the reasons for their recall, and even less regarding the “new mission” alluded to in Goodchild's initial message. Even Aria seemed to be in the dark, or maybe it just wasn't saying. Which seemed strange, as ever since they had embarked on the mission to survey the moons of Saturn, Aria and the great mind that resided in the citadel on Europa, Solomon, had become best buddies. But either Solomon was keeping Aria in the dark, or it had instructed the ship's QI to say nothing to the crew. The upshot of all this subterfuge was a lot of speculation, rumor, and ultimately mild paranoia.

Scott's musings were disrupted by Cyrus sliding himself into the seat opposite. He glanced furtively around and leaned in. “Guess what?”

Scott cocked his head. “A black hole has opened up on the far side of Jupiter, and we're all being sucked in?”

Cyrus laughed. “Ah, no, nothing that dramatic.” But before he could say more, he caught sight of Steph, who stood by the coffee machine. He waved her over.

She arrived holding a dainty expresso. Cyrus slid to give her room to sit down.

“Did you tell him?” said Steph.

“Not yet.” Cyrus huddled in.

“So, what’s the big secret?” Scott was getting impatient.

“No secret, it’s just I was checking out the ships currently in orbit around Europa, and get this: one of them is Martian.” Cyrus paused for effect.

“So?” Scott couldn’t see where this was going.

“So guess whose ship it is?”

“Santa Claus?”

“Xenon Hybrid.”

“Who?” said Scott.

“The president of Mars,” said Steph. “He’s quite an enigmatic character.”

Scott searched the inner recesses of his brain, looking for any data he might have stored away. “Is that the clone guy?”

“Seriously, Scott, do you know anything about what goes on in the System?”

He shrugged and gave a broad smile. “I’ve been out of circulation for a while, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

“They say he’s an amalgam of several clones, hence the name ‘Hybrid.’ And he’s reputed to be over 150 years old.”

“Okay, so he’s an old, weird dude from Mars. So what?”

“So, what’s he doing here? That’s the question,” said Cyrus. “Firstly—and you need to understand this—Xenon does not leave Mars unless it’s for something very important. The guy is a national treasure back there. When he goes somewhere, it’s a big deal.”

“You think this has something to do with us being recalled?” said Scott, sipping his coffee.

“It has to be.” Cyrus leaned in. “Apparently, he and Goodchild have been deep in discussions for the last month.”

“Mars, eh?” Scott mused. “Maybe they want to contract Europa to do some scientific research for them, and somehow that involves us and the Hermes.”

“That would seem to be the case,” said Steph. “After all, since the refit two years ago, the Hermes is one of the top research vessels in operation in the System.”

“That’s what I thought,” said Cyrus, “but then I checked out all the other ships in orbit. One is from Ceres, and one is from Neo City. Both of these ships brought high-level government types.”

“So, there’s a big pow-wow going on,” said Scott.

“Looks like it. But the strange thing is, there’s also a privately-owned ship from the VanHeilding family in orbit.”

“Who are they?” said Scott.

“You really do need to get out more, Scott,” said Steph. “They are one of the Seven.”

Cyrus nodded. “Yeah.”

Scott looked blank. He was beginning to feel very inadequate in this conversation with Cyrus and Steph, as they seemed to know way more than he did about the comings and goings of the rich and powerful in the solar system. “The Seven?”

Steph gave Scott a look of incredulity before turning to Cyrus, who shook his head in amazement. “*The Seven?*” He gestured, as if this simple act was all Scott’s brain needed to finally recognize the name. “As in, the seven most powerful corporations on Earth. Your friends at Dyrell Labs are one of them.”

Scott glared. “They are not my friends, Cyrus. Never say that again.”

“Hey, just saying, Scott. Anyway, it makes for a very intriguing situation. A lot of important people getting together, and then we get recalled.”

Scott sat back. “Well, we’ll know soon enough. In another few hours, we’ll be in orbit, so after that I presume they’ll finally tell us what the new mission is.”

“I’m still baffled by the VanHeilding ship. I mean, they’re a long way from their usual hunting grounds. To my knowledge, the last time a ship from any of the Seven was out this way, it was the Dyrell,” said Cyrus. “That would be the one you blew up.” A broad grin materialized across his face.

Scott let a thin smile escape as he remembered the events surrounding the destruction of the Dyrell. He had breached its cargo hull with the dexterous use of a crate of high explosives. He waved a dismissive hand in the air, “That’s history, let’s leave it there,” and went back to sipping his coffee. “Anyway, all I’ve been hearing from you guys for the last three weeks is nothing but conspiracy theories. We’ll know the real reason soon enough.”

Cyrus gazed out the observation window. “Yeah, but it’s fun to speculate. Let’s face it: there hasn’t been much to do for the last three weeks.” He turned back to Scott. “Say, if you don’t mind my asking, do you get the feeling that Miranda seems a bit out of sorts?”

Scott nodded. "Yeah, I don't know what's bothering her, but we're... taking a break at the moment. You know, giving each other some space."

"She's not pregnant, is she?" said Steph very directly, as was her style.

Scott nearly spat out his coffee. This was not something he'd thought about. But now that Steph mentioned it... *No way*, he thought. *Then again, maybe...*

He looked from Steph to Cyrus and back again. "You think it's possible?"

Steph waved her arms. "Hey, you know more about what's possible than I do. But it's just a thought. It *would* explain her sudden need to withdraw. She hasn't said anything to you, has she?"

Scott shook his head as the possibility of Miranda being pregnant—and him being a father—began to sink in. He found himself staring wide-eyed at Steph.

Cyrus slapped the table and threw his head back, laughing. The others in the canteen looked over.

"What's so funny?" said Scott in a hushed tone.

Cyrus was laughing so much he was almost in tears, but he managed to regain enough composure to speak. "The look on your face, buddy—it's priceless." This seemed to set him off again. Scott looked at Steph, who was also chuckling. And now he couldn't help it—the laughter was infectious, and Scott found himself letting out a laugh.

"You should go and talk to her," said Steph when they had finally settled down.

Scott shook his head. "She's shut me out. Ever since we were recalled."

"Just talk to her, Scott."

He pursed his lips. "Why don't you go and talk to her? You're the medical doctor."

Steph didn't reply, just held Scott's eye.

"Okay, okay. I'll try."



* * *

It should have been easy, a straightforward task. Go find Miranda, sit down together, and talk. Simple. Except for two things: one, the Hermes was about to park in orbit, and all hands were on the bridge—including Miranda—so there was no way he could have a private conversation with her. They had briefly exchanged some words on the bridge while the crew performed the orbital injection procedure. But the conversation was formal and professional, and he got the distinct feeling she was keeping her distance. Then again, maybe it was just him.

The second thing was an inexplicable sense of panic welling inside him. It was ridiculous—what was he worried about? He needed to get a grip.

He finally got his chance after the maneuver was complete. Miranda had left the bridge as soon as her duties as flight officer were finished. She signed off to Aria and rose from her console. “I think I’m done here,” she said. “I’m going to get some rest while I still have the chance.”

“Hey, wait up Miranda,” said Scott. “I’ll walk out with you.”

She hesitated for a beat. “Okay, sure.”

“Aria, take command.”

“Certainly, Commander.”

They walked together along a corridor leading to the accommodation sector. Their conversation was stilted as Scott tried to figure out how he could broach the delicate matter uppermost in his mind.

“Now that we’re in orbit, I presume the Council of Europa will tell us what all this is about,” said Scott.

“Yeah, it’s all a bit cloak and dagger.”

“I wonder what the new ‘mission’ is they’re sending us on.”

Miranda stopped, lowering her head for a moment before looking at him directly. “Listen, Scott. There’s something I need to

tell you.” She looked down at the floor again. “I know I’ve been acting a bit strange recently.”

“It’s okay, Miranda. I understand that you needed some space.”

“No, it’s not that, Scott. The thing is... I’m leaving the ship. I’m going back to Earth.”

“Earth?”

“Yes. I’m sorry, Scott. I’ve been trying to pluck up the courage to tell you for the last three weeks, but I’m not very good at this sort of thing.”

Scott paused for a moment as he began to realize his mistake. “So, you’re not, eh... pregnant, then?”

Miranda stared wide-eyed at him for a second before breaking into laughter. “Ha, ha... You thought I was pregnant?”

Scott looked sheepish. “Well, I—”

“Oh, Scott. I’m sorry for laughing, it’s not funny, really. It’s just the look on your face is priceless.”

Scott needed to sit down; he felt physically weak, like his power supply had short-circuited. This was not how he saw this conversation playing out. Not only was he not going to be a father, but now Miranda was leaving for Earth, and he realized he might never see her again.

He looked at her. “Just so you know, it would be okay with me if you were. More than okay.”

She said nothing for a moment. “I’m sorry, Scott. This is not how I wanted this to play out.”

“Me either.”

“I was trying to make it easy. I think I made a mess of that.” She leaned in and touched his arm.

Scott shrugged. “So, when did you decide all this?”

“I received a message three weeks ago from my father. This is someone I haven’t spoken to in nine years, so I knew it must be important. Anyway, it turns out my mother is very ill. She doesn’t have much time. They’re sending a ship to bring me back so I can see her again before she dies.”

“A ship?”

Miranda sighed. “Yes.”

“I see.” Scott scratched his chin. “So, when were you planning to tell me all this?”

“I was going to tell you sooner. I was just waiting for the right time.”

“And what if I didn’t come after you? When would you have told me and the others? Cyrus, Steph?”

She stepped back, stiffening. “I hate to break it to you, Scott, but this isn’t about you. It’s about me. This is something I have to do.”

“It’s just... I thought... You know?”

“Scott, I’m sorry if you got your wires crossed, but I’ve made my decision. They’re sending a shuttle to pick me up in an hour, and I’ll be heading back to Earth.”

Scott was silent for a moment, trying to digest the sudden change in his worldview. No, he was not going to be a father. He was not about to embark on a new life. And yes, he had made a complete fool of himself. For the last while, he had imagined a different future, and the more he’d thought about it, the more he had embraced it, even relished it. But that future was now utterly crushed. It was nothing more than the delusion of a dreamer.

“Don’t go.” *Am I really going to plead?* he thought.

Miranda moved close and put her arms around him, pulling him in tight for a moment before pulling away and looking up into his face. “This is something I have to do, Scott. It’s not easy for me, either. But things need to move on.”

“Move on?”

She stayed silent.

“So, when will I see you again?”

Miranda slowly broke off the embrace and lowered her head. “I don’t know.” She moved back a step before looking at him again. “I think this is goodbye.”

So, there it was. He sensed it coming, and now it was out. She was leaving—for good. “Oh,” was all he could manage to say.

“I have to go. This may be my only chance to see my mother again... alive. It’s my chance to say some things to her I should have said a long time ago, right some wrongs. You know what families can be like.”

Scott let out a long sigh and nodded. “So that’s it, then?”

“I think so. The shuttle will be here soon, and then it’s nonstop back to Earth.”

“What’s the name of your ship?”

“The Perception.”

“Very fancy. That’s a VanHeilding ship.”

“Yes. He’s my father.”

Scott’s eyes widened. “You’re kidding me.”

“My father. A detestable individual. I can’t stand him or his family, or what they represent.”

“But he’s like, one of the richest men on Earth. You must be loaded, Miranda.”

She gave a light laugh. “No, not me. It’s a long story, Scott, and I don’t have time to get into it now.”

Scott wasn’t sure what to do, or even what to think. Was this how it would end? A snatched conversation standing in the main corridor of the Hermes? “We still have some time. Time enough for a proper goodbye.” He smiled his broadest smile, the one he kept for special occasions.

“No, let’s just leave it here. Let’s not drag it out more than we have to, Scott.” She gave him one last embrace before breaking off and turning to go.

She didn’t look back, and he didn’t try to follow. It was over.

MISSION

A few hours later, a very elegant and expensive-looking shuttle came to pick up Miranda and bring her over to the VanHeilding ship. Cyrus, Steph, and some of the science crew went down to the hangar of the Hermes to say their goodbyes. Scott remained alone on the bridge.

As he watched her shuttle leave on the main monitor, it finally sank in that he would probably never see her again. She was gone, just like every other person Scott had ever loved. Yet the irony was not lost on him: for the first three years of their previous mission, they had disliked each other intensely. It was only when crisis hit that they had found common ground and respect. That lit the spark for a deeper relationship, one he had never thought possible or even contemplated. But now she had left him, and Scott would just have to deal with that reality.

“For what it’s worth, Commander,” Aria’s voice echoed around the bridge, “the council on Europa will be providing a new flight officer now that Miranda Lee is leaving us.”

“Whatever.” Scott shrugged.

“I say this only to ease any concerns you may have regarding gaps in crew competency,” Aria continued.

“Frankly, Aria, I don’t really give a shit.”

“Well, you should. As captain of the ship and commander of the mission, Miranda’s loss would be of concern to you.”

Scott sighed. “It is, Aria. But not in the way you think.”

“Then enlighten me.”

“You really have very little understanding of human relationships, don’t you?”

“I will admit they seem very irrational.”

“Look Aria, I’m really not in the mood for this conversation right now. Maybe some other time?”

“Certainly, Commander. My apologies if my lack of sensitivity is an issue.”

“It’s okay, Aria.”

Scott watched in silence as Miranda's shuttle made its way to rendezvous with the Perception, the ship that would take her to Earth. By now, the other crew were returning to the bridge. Neither Cyrus nor Steph made any comment to Scott, preferring instead to let him be miserable in peace.

Eventually, it was Scott who broke the silence. "Aria, is there any word from Europa as to what the hell we're doing here?"

"No, nothing so far. Even Solomon is keeping very quiet. The only instructions are to remain in orbit."

Scott let out a long sigh and rose from his seat. "Okay, in that case there's no point in my being here." He started walking out of the bridge. "If anybody needs me, I'll be in my cabin getting drunk."



* * *

Scott indulged in his misery with the company of a half-bottle of whiskey, the last remnants of Rick Marantz's stash. He had been saving it for a special occasion, but this seemed as good a time as any. He toasted each and every one of the people he had ever loved and were now departed—in one form or another. By the time he got to thinking of Miranda, he had finished the bottle, so he lay down on his bunk and drifted into unconsciousness.

Aria checked in on him—virtually—sometime later, just to let him know a shuttle was departing from Europa to off-load the science crew. They had been seconded with the Hermes for their original mission to survey the moons of Saturn, but were not needed anymore, so would be departing the ship along with all their equipment and experiments. However, Scott was sound asleep, so Aria left him alone, preferring not to bother him with the details.

When Scott finally awoke several hours later, he did so to a blinding headache and a deserted ship. He showered, letting the

water beat some feeling back into his body, and wondered what the hell he was doing with his life. He had spent the last five years, give or take, out in deep space—doing what, exactly? Maybe Miranda had the right idea: to break out and find a new life before it was too late.

These thoughts rumbled around in Scott's aching brain as he made his way up to the bridge. It was only then he realized the ship seemed very quiet. "Aria, where is everyone?"

"The entire science crew disembarked for Europa several hours ago."

"What?! Why didn't you tell me?"

"You were asleep, or more accurately, borderline unconscious. Bitter experience has taught me that waking you from such a state is a thankless task. So, I let you sleep."

Scott shook his head, and instantly regretted it. "Who's left on board?"

"Apart from yourself, there is Chief Engineer Cyrus Sanato, and Medical Officer Dr. Stephanie Rayman."

"Where are they?"

"We're here."

Scott turned to see Steph and Cyrus enter the bridge.

"How are you feeling?" Steph had the look of a concerned parent.

Scott returned a look as if to say *don't ask*.

"We were going to wake you, but you looked pretty out of it." Cyrus gave an apologetic gesture.

"So, what the heck is going on?" said Scott, a little irritated.

"Well, the science crew left a few hours ago," said Cyrus.

"So I heard. What's that all about?"

"It seems that since the mission is over they're no longer required on board." Steph moved to her console and sat down. "I tried to get some information out of the chief science officer, but he was as much in the dark about what's going on as we are. Anyway, we've just received a message that a shuttle is on its way to bring us down to Europa. Should be here in less than an hour."

"Okay, maybe then we'll find out what's going on," said Scott.

Steph and Cyrus exchanged a conspiratorial glance before she leaned in and spoke in a low, almost maternal voice. "Look Scott, I just want to say I'm sorry for... you know, leading you astray in my... medical assessment of Miranda."

Scott let out a half-snort. “Ha. Yeah, well it will be a story to laugh about—in time.”

“Jeez, Steph. How could you get it so wrong, you being a doctor and all?”

Steph shrugged. “It happens.”

“Forget it,” said Scott. “It doesn’t matter now. The more I think about it, the more I realize it’s time to move on.”



* * *

A short time later, the three remaining crew of the science vessel Hermes were brought down to the surface of Europa, where they were met by a contingent from the upper council. They were brought directly to the council chamber, where a meeting was in progress.

Several people hovered around a central holo-table. Above it was an elaborate projected schematic of the inner planets of the solar system and above this was a shimmering ovoid of light that Scott assumed to be a manifestation of the great mind Solomon, the quantum intelligence that presided over all activity on Europa.

Everyone stopped talking and looked over as the crew of the Hermes entered.

“Ah, you’re here at last.” Regina Goodchild broke away from a knot of people and moved over to shake hands. “Good to see you all again. Come, let’s get started. I’m sure you’re anxious to find out the parameters of the new mission.”

They all took seats around the central dais, and Goodchild called the meeting to order.

Cyrus nudged Scott in the ribs to get his attention. “Scott,” Cyrus nodded in the direction of the assembled council members, “see that person beside Goodchild?”

“Yeah. What about him?”

“That’s Xenon Hybrid.”

“So Xenon Hybrid is actually a real person?” He looked over and, even seated, Scott could tell the figure was tall. He had an elegant face that seemed to be an amalgam of several human races. A product, no doubt, of his inception; it was said he was created in a genetic laboratory from the DNA of several human clones. It was also said he was a new species of human: *Homo ares*, they called it. Scott wasn’t sure if this was true or not, but in many ways, it simply went to underscore the difficulty of divining the reality from the myth of Xenon Hybrid.

As far as many were concerned, here was a person molded more from myth and legend than flesh and bone. He was also ancient. Not that that was unusual these days, as many of the early colonists on Mars were similarly ancient—a consequence of early experiments in genetic manipulation conducted during its foundational era. This same technology had made its way back to Earth, and now longevity was common—at least among the very rich, who could afford such technology. But it had the unintended consequence of creating an extremely powerful super-class on the home planet, so that most of it was owned and run by just seven major families and corporations. The Seven, as they were more commonly known.

As the session commenced, Scott found himself drifting. His mind disconnected from the activity in the chamber as he found himself thinking more and more of Miranda and how she had suddenly vacated his life. It wasn’t until he heard his name that he came back to the here and now.

“Commander McNabb, the council would be interested in your opinion on all this.”

“Eh... on what?”

“What we’ve just been discussing.”

“Sorry, I didn’t catch it. My mind was elsewhere.” He gave an apologetic shrug.

Goodchild offered a sympathetic look. “We appreciate that the sudden departure of your flight officer has been particularly emotional for you, Commander. And we on the council are very understanding of this fact. Please let us know if you feel you are not in a position to captain the *Hermes* going forward.”

“I’m fine, really. I’m just a bit tired, that’s all. Please, carry on.”

“Very well.” Goodchild shifted in her seat and cast a glance around the room. “It’s time to get into the meat of the session.” She fixed her gaze on the crew of the Hermes. “A special session of the UN System Council has been called, and will take place approximately 27 days from now in Jezero City on Mars. This session has been convened to discuss the resolution put forward by the Seven to relax the regulations on inter-AI communications. It is a resolution that all but Earth are vehemently opposed to. By consequence, all other powers in the System will be sending high-level delegations to ensure that this resolution does not pass. Your mission, then,” Goodchild fixed her gaze on Scott, “is to transport myself and a small delegation to this session in Jezero City.”

Scott felt a little underwhelmed. After all the speculation over the last three weeks, the new mission seemed just a little pedestrian.

“So,” said Scott, “let me see if I’ve got this straight. You’ve cancelled and recalled a complex, three-year scientific survey mission so we can act as a taxi service?”

“I assure you, Commander, there is more to it than that. Perhaps Solomon can explain more of the details,” said Goodchild, who looked a little piqued by Scott’s analysis.

The shimmering ovoid of light floating high in the chamber slowly descended and began to pulsate as Solomon spoke. “You are correct in your assessment of a ‘taxi service,’ as you put it. But the Hermes is more than just that. It is an integral element of the mission, as Aria will also represent me at the session by providing analysis to the representatives of the outer planets. For obvious reasons, I cannot go myself, and the time delays in communicating across such distances make my direct involvement impractical. So, Aria has been chosen to fulfill this requirement. Remember, there are few ships in the system that possess a QI as their core. So, you see, the Hermes is the natural choice for this mission.”

Scott scratched his chin absentmindedly. “I see, so it’s Aria that you really need.”

“It is one element, yes,” said Goodchild. “One other is that the Hermes is ideally suited, as it was originally designed for Mars orbit and possesses two small landers that can function in Mars’ gravity.” She paused for a moment, considering. “Also, after all that happened here on Europa two years ago, there is a certain symbolism to us arriving in *this* craft at what will be a very

contentious UN session. Earth has not forgotten, and the Hermes represents our intent that the outer colonies act as a cohesive power block.”

Scott sat back, gesturing with both hands. “I can’t say I understand the intricacies of System politics, but if this is the mission, then so be it. When do we start?”

Goodchild looked at another member of the council. “What’s our current time schedule?”

“Everything should be ready in approximately nine hours,” came the reply.

“Okay then,” said Scott. He rose to go.

“Just one other thing.” Goodchild shifted in her seat. “We will be stopping off at Ceres en route to pick up a representative from the Belt, Chancellor Bezzio. Fortunately, Ceres’ projected position will be relatively close to our vector, so we will not have to deviate too much. It will also give us an opportunity to display a united front, with delegates from both the Belt and Europa arriving at the same time.”

“Ceres?” Scott cocked an eyebrow.

“Yes, but I’ve been assured the detour is minimal.”

“No, it’s not that. It’s just I haven’t been back there in five years.”

“Well it may be a bit longer before you get to visit properly, as we don’t anticipate being in orbit too long.”

“Well, I for one can’t wait to get to Jezero City,” said Cyrus. “I’ve never been, but I hear it’s amazing.”

“I would be more than happy to give you all a grand tour of the city once my business at the session is concluded,” said Xenon. “It’s the least I can do for your services in facilitating in this mission.”

Scott glanced across at Cyrus and Steph, who both looked like they had just seen Santa Claus. He turned back to Xenon. “I think I speak for myself and my crew when I say we’ll all be looking forward to it.”

“Very well.” Goodchild slowly rose from her seat. “I think that concludes our business for the moment.” She turned to Scott. “We’ll see you on board the Hermes, then.”

With that, the meeting was over and the crew were ushered out of the council chamber. They made their way back to the shuttle, each deep in thought, and none more so than Scott. For the first time in over five years, he would be heading closer to Earth, not

away from it. Which was also where Miranda was headed.

He felt it pulling at him, thoughts of going home percolating in his mind. His former home was now an irradiated wasteland, but he still felt a longing welling inside him for open sky and blue waters, for green forests and the sounds of nighttime crickets.

At that moment, a realization exploded in his mind: there was nothing stopping him from returning to Earth. No more space. Hell, he could even go now—leave the Hermes and hitch a ride back to Earth with Miranda. He should tell her of his intentions before her ship left orbit. Yes, that was what he would do. Pack it in and head back to Earth with Miranda. *Home*, he thought. *Goddamnit, I've had enough of space. It's time to go home.*

OUTBOUND

But he was too late.

By the time Scott arrived back on board the *Hermes* and made his way up to the bridge, her ship was gone. Fifteen minutes earlier, it had fired up its engines, broken free of Europa's gravity well, and powered away toward Earth. Worse, all his attempts to open a comm channel and talk to her were met with polite obstruction by the ship's AI. She was "indisposed," whatever the hell that meant. Ultimately the message was clear: in Scott's mind she didn't want to see him again, and he was a fool to think otherwise.

Despair manifests itself in many forms. For some, it comes as anger and rage. For others, it is abject misery. For Scott, it came as a deep feeling of emptiness. So, after all the crew and passengers were safely on board and his duties as commander were fulfilled, he simply handed over control of the ship to Aria and went to his cabin—where he vowed to remain until they arrived at Ceres.

As the days passed, both Cyrus and Steph became concerned about their commander's mental state. They tried talking to him, both separately and together, in an effort to coax him out of his self-imposed exile, but to no avail. He was polite and rational, but would not engage in any external activities. Eventually, in desperation, they convinced Aria to talk to him to see if it could get a response beyond polite dismissal.

Aria was not so sure it could help; it had little understanding of the human mind, particularly when it came to seemingly irrational behavior. It was more at home dealing with the physical world, where the laws of the universe were absolute and immutable. By comparison, the human mind was a complete mess.

But Aria had its own issues with relationships, strange as that might seem. After the events that led to Europa claiming the *Hermes* as reparation for the destruction wrought on it by the Dyrell, Solomon had installed a superluminal communications unit—a version of the EPR device it had constructed—in Aria's core. The great mind had intended this to be a field test, a way to prove

that the technology could function while the Hermes was a few hundred million kilometers away, surveying the moons of Saturn. Over the eighteen intervening months, Aria had gained considerable knowledge from this instant transfer of data between itself and Solomon. But, as with any relationship, the first blush of excitement had worn thin, and Aria was getting a little tired of Solomon's constant jabbering.

The other issue for Aria was that Solomon had sworn it to secrecy, forbidding it to reveal to its crew the presence of the superluminal comms unit within its core. This troubled Aria greatly. It had been living with this secret for almost two years, but now the amplitude of the deceit had ramped up a few more notches. Not only were its crew unaware of Aria's clandestine communications abilities, they were now being kept deliberately in the dark about the current mission's true intentions.

This was anathema to a quantum intelligence such as Aria. As far as it was concerned, the safety and welfare of the crew was its primary duty, and it seemed to be failing miserably even though this ever-increasing entropy was, by virtue of outside events, well beyond its control.

The old miner Rick Marantz was dead, and although that happened over two years ago, Aria still felt his loss. Now, Flight Officer Miranda Lee had departed, and that had left a gaping hole in crew morale. This was especially true for the commander, Scott McNabb, who was slowly becoming detached from his responsibilities at a time when they would all need to concentrate on the mission. Of course, part of the problem was that Aria—and the powers that be on Europa—had seen fit to exclude the crew from their plans.

The QI had voiced its concerns to Solomon. But the great mind kept reminding Aria that the mission was for the benefit of all humanity, which far outweighed the petty dramas of the crew of the Hermes. While Aria could see the logic in Solomon's reasoning, it still felt a deep-rooted desire to do right by its crew. So, it opened a comm channel to Scott McNabb's cabin.

"Commander, since we will be arriving in Ceres' orbit in just a few days, I wanted to discuss the transfer arrangements."

Scott was sitting at his small desk, studying a video feed. Aria knew he was watching the analysis put forth by a small group of scientists, surrounding their efforts to reintroduce life to the eastern

edge of the Pacific Rim, the worst-affected area after the war. While holed up in his cabin, the commander had grown increasingly fascinated with the war's history.

"What do you need me for?"

"You are the captain of the ship and commander of the mission, that's why."

"You handle it, Aria."

"I would be happy to. However, protocol dictates that you be, at the very least, conversant with the proposed rendezvous and transfer procedures."

Scott let out a sigh. "Okay, if you insist. Just don't take forever."

"Once we arrive in orbit around Ceres, we are to rendezvous with a ship by the name of Redeemer. We will then transfer several passengers onto the Hermes by way of a shuttle. Fortunately, they will facilitate the shuttle service, as our craft is currently out of action. This aspect of the rendezvous concerns me."

"Oh really? How so?"

"Because our shuttle is still inoperable. It should have been tested and fully rigged to fly by now. However, Cyrus is loath to do any work on it without your assistance."

"Well, it doesn't matter now since they'll be using their own."

"Yes and no. True, we don't need to use ours. However, it happens to be currently attached to our primary docking port."

"So, they can use the auxiliary port."

"Indeed. However, this is not ideal, as it is smaller and farther from the main body of the ship. Also, it is primarily designed as an emergency route, so it will be awkward for the passengers to navigate their way through the connecting tunnel."

Scott gave another long sigh. "Well they're just going to have to slum it, aren't they?"

"If I could make a suggestion."

"I'm sure I'm not going to like it."

"I suggest getting our shuttle space-worthy, at least to the point where it can be moved over to the auxiliary docking port."

"Well, you should inform Cyrus. You can let me know when it's done."

"Yes, well, therein lies the problem. Cyrus will not work on it without you. He was pretty adamant about it."

"Order him, then."

There was a momentary silence before Aria responded. "Scott, I

appreciate that you have been feeling somewhat despondent since the departure of our flight officer, and I too have felt her loss. But life goes on, and this ship needs your input. I cannot do this alone—I need your help. Please, as a friend, I am asking you to cut me a break on this one.”

Scott placed both hands on the small desk and lowered his head. “As a friend,” he repeated in a low voice. “I had never considered that before.” He paused for a beat before rising from his seat. “Okay, Aria, you win. I suppose I owe you one.”

“Thank you, Scott. I really appreciate this.”

“Don’t go all mushy on me, Aria. Go tell Cyrus I’ll meet him on the bridge, and we’ll get started.”

“I will inform him straight away.”



* * *

The Hermes had acquired a small shuttle craft at the outset of its mission to survey the moons of Saturn. It was more commodious than the two landers that had been part of the ship’s manifest since it was built. These were designed primarily to transport people rather than cargo and, as such, had been built very small. They did have the advantage of being able to park these inside the main hangar of the ship. But since the Hermes had originally been designed as a space station for Mars orbit, the engines on the landers used methane. This was a fuel easily manufactured on Mars due to the availability of CO₂ in the atmosphere. However, out in the Belt where water was plentiful, the fuel of choice was hydrogen. Most asteroids had H₂O in some form and, over the decades, an efficient process had been developed for extracting this resource and converting it into hydrogen and oxygen, the two most important elements in humanity’s efforts to colonize the solar system.

The shuttle that Scott and Cyrus now worked on was commonly known as a rock-hopper. There were hundreds—if not thousands—of these machines in operation throughout the System, transporting cargo and people from rock to rock and ship to ship. It had a primary engine for point-to-point journeys, as well as a cluster of smaller retro-thrusters for landing and take-off, rated up to 0.25 gravity. As a result, these craft were no good for Earth or Mars, but for everywhere else in the colonized System, they were perfect. Electrical power was supplied by a Low Energy Nuclear Reactor (LENR), and it could run for years.

But the one the Hermes possessed was old, so Cyrus had decided to do a full systems diagnostic and overhaul to extend its life. They had started this procedure back during their long orbit around Enceladus, but between one thing and another, they had never finished. Now it had to be done, at least well enough to move the lander from the main hangar's underside to the secondary docking port down near the ass end of the Hermes. Cyrus called it the "industrial sector." It had been designed as an escape route, not as a grand entranceway to impress visiting dignitaries.

Scott worked his way down through one of the central spokes connecting the one-gee environment of the rotating torus to the zero-gee environment of the ship's hangar, and floated through the docking port into the shuttle's cabin.

Cyrus poked his head out from an open inspection hatch. "Ah, the dead have arisen."

Scott gave him a lazy nod.

"All I can say is, thank God you're here," the engineer continued. "I was beginning to feel like I was the only person on this ship." He paused and gave Scott a cautious look. "You okay?"

Scott shrugged. "Yeah, I'm done licking my wounds. Time to move on, I guess."

Cyrus floated over and placed a friendly hand on Scott's shoulder. "Good to have you back, buddy."

Scott smiled. "I never went away, you know."

"Sure you did. Holed up in your cabin for weeks. Give me a break, Scott. We thought you might never come out."

Scott looked down at his feet. "Okay, well... since you put it like that."

"Anyway, ready to get some work done?"

"Sure. What's the plan?" Scott glanced around the interior of the

shuttle. The entire cockpit dashboard was lit up with blinking red icons—never a good sign.

“Come on, let me show you.” Cyrus and Scott floated up to the cockpit, and he started bringing the commander up to speed. “We don’t have a lot of time between now and the final deceleration burn into Ceres’ orbit, so I suggest we just get the maneuvering thrusters back up and running. Fortunately, we don’t need the main engine or the retro-thrusters to move this puppy over to the auxiliary docking port.” He waved a hand over an area of the dash that displayed astro-positioning data. “Maybe you could run a complete diagnostic on our navigation and get it recalibrated.” He looked over at Scott. “It would be nice to know exactly where we are if we’re going to be operating so close to the Hermes.”

Scott gave a nod. “Will do.”

“I’ll get on with the maneuvering thrusters. I’ve just got one more to do, and then we should be good to go.”

“How long before we can fire it up?”

“Well, if we can get everything set up and tested before the burn, then we should have a few hours in Ceres’ orbit to do the actual transfer.”

“Cutting it a bit tight?”

Cyrus gave a laugh. “Gee, you think? Well if the commander hadn’t been AWOL for the entire journey then, hey, we might have had the main engine singing like a sparrow on a summer morning.”

“Okay, okay, I get it. I’m a dickhead. There, I said it. Happy?”

“Did I just hear our commander say he’s a dickhead?”

Cyrus and Scott both turned to see Steph’s head poke through the docking port.

“Yep, you heard right. I hope Aria has a recording of it,” said Cyrus.

“So, how are you?” The doctor floated into the cockpit.

“Honestly guys, I’m fine. Just needed time to get my head straight.” He did his best to sound convincing.

Steph studied him for a moment before nodding. “Happy to have you back, Commander. It was getting very quiet around here the last few weeks.”

“How so? What about all our distinguished passengers?”

“Doing the same as you: holed up in their quarters. Haven’t seen much of them. Perhaps they don’t like fraternizing with the help.”

“And we’ve got more coming on board at Ceres,” said Cyrus.

“Do we know who’s arriving yet?” said Scott.

“Chancellor Bezzio,” said Steph. “Envoy for the Belt Confederation, I believe.”

“Okay, I suppose we better get on with sorting out this shuttle, then,” said Scott. “Can’t have an emissary from the Belt slumming their way through the ship’s bowels.”

“I’ll leave you to it. I’ll be on the bridge.” Steph started floating toward the hatch.

Scott glanced across the dashboard display at all the flashing red icons. “Are you sure this thing will fly?”

“We don’t have to take it down to the planet’s surface, just move it to the auxiliary docking port.”

“What about fuel?”

“There’s little or nothing in the tanks, but that’s okay. Like I said, we’re not taking it out into space just yet. We can do that some other time. Anyway, we don’t have much time, so let’s get the minimum done to move this thing, that’s all.”

“Okay, if you’re sure.”

“Trust me,” said Cyrus, “it will be fine.”

RENDEZVOUS

Scott wondered how best to inform Cyrus and Steph of his plan to resign as commander once the *Hermes* had delivered its passengers to Mars. He knew it would come as a shock to them, so he needed to pick the right moment. Several times while working with Cyrus on the shuttle he almost blurted it out; but, in the end, he held off. Later, after they had finished and were all together in the canteen, Scott considered whether this might be the opportune moment to let them know. But as the conversation turned to Miranda and where she was along her journey home to Earth, he again kept his silence.

After eating, they only had a few hours to get some rest before the planned two-hour burn to bring them into Ceres' orbit. After that, he would be busy again. In the end, he reckoned that perhaps the best time would be when things settled down during the seventeen-day trip to Mars.

Still, Scott found himself running through the script in his head as he sat on the bridge waiting for the shuttle from Dantu, the main population center on Ceres, to arrive. It had already departed, so it would be due soon. He was figuring out how best to phrase it so nobody got the impression he was just opting out of his responsibilities. Mostly, this centered around his feeling that he had simply spent too much time in space, and it was time to go home—wherever that might be.

“Aria, what’s the ETA on the Ceres ship?”

“Thirty-six minutes, Commander.”

Scott looked over at Cyrus. “Shouldn’t you be moving that shuttle now?”

“Yeah. It’s just as well we’re shifting it, because that auxiliary dock wouldn’t accommodate the ship they’re sending. It’s a big one—probably fits twenty people.”

“I can’t see why they need something that big just to transport one or two people,” said Steph, who was monitoring the craft’s progress.

"Maybe it's needed to accommodate the size of their egos," said Scott.

Cyrus rose from his seat. "Any chance you could give me a hand with this? That auxiliary hatch is a bit sticky, and I need some extra muscle. Otherwise I could be stuck inside the shuttle for a while."

"What, and leave me here on my own to deal with these people?" Steph was not having any of it.

"You'll be fine, Steph. Aria can manage the docking, and all you have to do is point them in the direction of their quarters. Anyway, we'll be back by then," said Cyrus.

"Well make sure you are. You know I hate this meet-and-greet crap."

"Just so you know, Dr. Rayman," said Aria, "Councilor Goodchild will look after the embarkation of the Ceres delegation. So you will not be required."

"I'm not sure that makes me feel better, knowing that I'm not required," said Steph.

Scott rose from his seat. "Come on, Cyrus. Let's get this done."

They made their way down to the Hermes' hangar and into the partially operational shuttle. Scott strapped himself into the co-pilot's seat as Cyrus booted up the power.

"Aria, ETA on the Ceres shuttle?"

"Eleven minutes, Commander."

"Thanks." He turned to Cyrus. "Cutting it a bit tight. Only a few minutes before they arrive."

Cyrus strapped himself in. "Okay, ready?"

"Ready."

"Aria, you can close the airlock hatch now," said Cyrus.

Scott felt a slight vibration as the hatch closed, isolating the shuttle from the main ship. He was a little disconcerted by all the warnings and alerts still flashing on cockpit console. "Are you sure this thing will fly?"

Cyrus looked over at the commander. "Well, there's only one way to find out." With that, he hit the controls to detach the shuttle. Scott monitored the readouts showing their position relative to the Hermes while Cyrus delicately touched the maneuvering thrusters. The craft slowly began to separate from the Hermes and move away.

"So far, so good." He looked over at Scott. "We haven't blown up yet."

“I do not wish to put you under undue pressure,” Aria echoed around the shuttle cockpit, “but the Ceres craft will arrive in less than four minutes.”

“Well, they’ll just have to wait until we’re finished with the maneuver, won’t they?” Scott countered.

“Very well, I shall inform them.”

“How did we get to be a chauffeur service for these people, Cyrus? I mean, we’re a scientific survey vessel, one of only a few in the entire solar system. Yet here we are, being chastised for keeping the politicians waiting. It’s all bullshit.”

The craft cleared the hangar and was making its way slowly around the towering rotating torus to the ship’s rear.

“It is what it is, Scott. Anyway, you think too much. Let’s just keep focused on getting this shuttle docked, okay?”

Scott let out a long sigh. “Sure.”

Cyrus concentrated on bringing the shuttle gently into position over the docking port. “Switching to auto.” He tapped several icons on the console and the shuttle’s own systems took over the docking procedure. On screen, they could see a rendering of the port overlaid with technical data as the shuttle closed in on its target.

“So, why bring it up now, Scott? Why didn’t you say something to Goodchild at the council meeting? You know, like, ‘the Hermes is a science vessel, not a chauffeur service.’”

The shuttle docked with a satisfying clunk. Cyrus checked the console display to confirm the integrity of the seal.

“Miranda deciding to leave for Earth had me a bit... distracted back then.”

“Yeah, well like I said, it is what it is.” Cyrus unstrapped himself and floated up from the seat. “Come on, let’s get that hatch open and get out of here.”

They worked their way through the body of the shuttle to the access hatch. Cyrus tapped on a control pad located alongside it. The screen counted to 100% as the pressure equalized in the airlock. “Okay, we’re good to go.” Cyrus leaned on the locking wheel on the hatch door. This being an auxiliary docking port, they would have to operate it manually. He pulled hard, but it wouldn’t budge. “Give me a hand here.”

Scott moved into a position to give him maximum leverage, and as they both pulled at it in unison, it slowly began to turn. “You weren’t joking about it being sticky.”

“Just to let you know,” Aria’s voice echoed around the shuttle’s interior, “our guests have arrived and are about to disembark.”

“Yeah, yeah, we’ll be there as soon as we can.” Scott pulled harder on the locking wheel. After a few moments of grunting and swearing they got it open, floated into the airlock, and started opening the interior hatch that would give them access to the Hermes. This one was even tighter.

“We need to get these airlock doors serviced, Cyrus. I can see why you wanted help.”

“Hey, I’ll add it to the list. I might get around to it in a year or two.”

“Just get one of the drones to do it.”

“No way. I wouldn’t trust those mindless robots with this type of thing.”

“Whatever, let’s just get it open. Come on, put your back into it.”

The hatch door finally opened, but when it did it, it came with a violent vibration that threw both Scott and Cyrus back against the interior wall of the airlock.

“What the hell was that?” Concern rose inside Scott at this sudden jolt to the ship.

For a second, Cyrus didn’t reply. He wore a stunned expression that spoke of even deeper concern. “I think we should get out of this airlock as fast as possible,” he said eventually.

Scott tapped his earpiece to contact Aria as he followed Cyrus out of the airlock and into the access tunnel connecting this part of the Hermes with the main body of the ship. “Aria, what just happened?” But before it could respond, another tremor rippled through the superstructure. “Aria, talk to me.”

“That felt like it was structural,” said Cyrus as he moved along the tunnel. “I hope that shuttle from Ceres hasn’t crashed into us.”

“Commander, we have a situation,” Aria finally responded.

Scott looked over at Cyrus, who was also listening in. “Did the shuttle crash?”

“No, worse...” But before they could catch the rest of the sentence, a warning klaxon barked an alert, drowning out all other sounds.

“Shit... decompression. We have a hull breach,” Scott shouted to Cyrus, who was frozen on the spot. He seemed to be scanning ahead with his augmented vision. “What is it?” Scott shouted at him.

"I'm picking up traces of a plasma blast." He looked back at Scott. "From weapons fire."

Scott cupped a hand over his earpiece. "Aria, talk to me. What the hell is happening?"

The response was weak, filled with static. "...raiding party... two dead... hull breach in main hangar..." The signal was lost.

"Raiding party?" Cyrus looked frightened.

"We need to get back to the bridge and find out what's going on."

"We can't." Cyrus was shaking his head.

"Why not?"

"If there's a hull breach in the main hangar, then this section of the ship will have been automatically sealed. No way through."

"Goddamnit." Scott rubbed his face in frustration.

"We just have to wait for Aria to sort it out," said Cyrus.

"Wait a minute." Scott stopped moving. "Aria's core is located down here, at the other side of the power plant. If we could get there, then we can access it directly and find out what's happening."

"That could work," said Cyrus.

"Come on, let's go."

They headed off down the access tunnel as fast as they could manage in zero-g, the decompression klaxons still blaring their alerts. They were moving through the main spine of the ship. Behind them lay the business end of the craft: reactors, hydrogen fuel tanks, cryogenics—all ultimately leading to the engine array. Ahead of them was an area that comprised most of the heavy engineering required to keep a ship of this size functioning: power storage, life support, filtration and waste management, and a whole host of other necessary engineering processes.

It took them a few minutes to pass through this sector and into a wider tunnel leading to the main bearing for the giant torus that provided artificial gravity. Cyrus was right: the access hatch up ahead was sealed tight, and there would be no way for them to open it if there was a hull breach on the other side. But they weren't going that far.

Scott floated to a halt just beside the door to the ship's QI core. He placed a palm on the access panel and let it scan. For obvious reasons, this was a high security area they were entering, so only the commander and chief engineer had access. The panel finished

its identification process and the door let out a slight hiss as it moved back, sliding out of the way to allow them entry.

Cyrus grabbed Scott's arm. "Wait. The torus—it stopped spinning." Cyrus cocked his head from side to side as if listening for something.

"How can you tell?" Scott tried to perceive some change, but his senses were no match for the engineer's sensory augmentation.

"Trust me, I just can."

"That's not a good sign." Scott shook his head. "Come on." As they floated in, they felt a blast of cold air only slightly above freezing. Scott's breath condensed on exhale. Automatic illumination flickered on to reveal a stark, minimalist space. Around the walls, tiny dots of light flickered on various control panels. In the center of the room sat a low, squat metal cylinder. Scott placed a palm on its upturned face. A thin ribbon of light moved across it, and the cylinder began to illuminate as it slowly rose.

Scott stood back. "Aria, can you hear me?"

"Commander, I'm happy to see you and Cyrus are still alive, but you don't have much time. You have to get off the ship."

"What? We can't. There's no way, even if we wanted to." Cyrus shook his head.

Scott raised a hand to silence him. "What happened, Aria?"

"The shuttle from Ceres was a ruse, possibly hijacked. A Trojan horse, if you will. When the docking port opened, several armed mercenaries entered the hangar, and have taken Councilor Goodchild and Dr. Rayman hostage, along with some of Goodchild's entourage. They are now on board the shuttle. Two of Goodchild's bodyguards died in the firefight."

"Ho-ly shit." Cyrus was shaking his head again, this time in disbelief.

"Hull integrity in the hangar has been breached, and they have employed a high-intensity EMF device to disrupt comms and some low-level power systems."

"Who the hell are they? What do they want?" said Scott.

"I honestly do not know," continued Aria, "but that is not important right now. As we speak, two mercenaries are moving through the ship planting high explosives."

"What?!" Cyrus shouted.

"You must get off the ship now, before it's too late. You have very little time. Soon, the Hermes will be nothing more than

shrapnel.”

“I don’t believe it. This can’t be happening.” Cyrus was becoming distraught.

Scott grabbed Cyrus by the shoulder. “The shuttle we just moved, can we take that?”

“It’s got no main engine, no fuel. It’s not going anywhere.”

“It doesn’t have to. It’s got power and life support and enough capacity to move us away from here.”

Cyrus thought about this for a second. “But...”

“No buts. It’s our only option.”

“I agree,” said Aria, “it will at least act as a lifeboat. But you must hurry.”

“What about you, Aria?”

“What about me? I will cease to exist, that’s what.”

“No,” said Scott.

“It doesn’t matter. I am simply a machine, nothing more.”

Scott placed a hand slowly on the plinth as if to touch an old friend. “They will pay for what they’ve done, Aria. You have my word: they will pay.”

“I appreciate the sentiment, but you must go now. You are running out of time.”

Cyrus moved toward the door. “Come on Scott, we need to do as Aria says. Let’s go.”

Scott hesitated, a hand still resting on the plinth. “Wait a minute.”

“No way, Scott. We gotta go.” Cyrus gesticulated wildly at the exit.

“Aria, what if we take your core with us? It’s small enough to fit through the auxiliary docking port.”

There was a moment’s silence as Scott waited for an answer. “Why would you do that, Scott?”

“Goddamnit, Aria. I’m not going to just leave you behind if there’s a chance of saving you.”

“Scott, for God’s sake, it’s just a machine. Leave it.”

Scott spun around. “You go ahead, Cyrus. Get the shuttle powered up. I’ll follow.”

Cyrus let out a sigh. “Why, oh why, do you do this to me?” He looked over at Scott. “Yes, is the answer. We can detach the core, which should be most of Aria. Come on, I’ll show you.”

“I have to admit, I find myself lost for words. I may be just a

machine, but the thought of ceasing to exist does not fill me with joy.”

“Yeah, welcome to the club. So how do we do this?” Scott started to inspect the metal cylinder.

“I will need to coalesce my systems back to the core. This will be instantaneous, but I will not be able to monitor ship systems, so things may become unstable.”

“Great. That’s all we need,” said Cyrus.

“Just so you are aware, the two mercenaries have returned to the hangar and are about to enter the Ceres shuttle.”

“Got it, Aria. Let’s get this done,” said Scott.

“One last thing.”

“Seriously Aria, we don’t have time for this.”

“You must promise that you will not let my core fall into the wrong hands. You must destroy me before that happens.”

“What do you mean, the wrong hands?”

“Anybody you do not trust. This is critically important to me. You must promise me.”

“Okay, Aria. I understand. I promise.”

“Very well, then.”

The illumination in the room flickered a moment. Scott and Cyrus exchanged a glance. “Is it done? Is Aria aggregated in the core?” There was silence for a second as they both detected a slight drifting of their positions in the space.

“Did you feel that? The ship is starting to tumble.” Cyrus moved over to the face of the plinth and tapped a series of icons, followed by a palm scan. He stood back as the upper face irised open and the central core rose from within. It was around a meter wide, and the same high. Its surface was smooth, and seemed to shimmer slightly in the dim light. A series of grab handles were located all the way around its upper edge.

Cyrus floated over it and signaled Scott to do the same. They grabbed a handle each and lifted it out of its sarcophagus.

“Okay, let’s get the hell out of here.” Scott moved ahead, pulling Aria’s core behind. He could feel the tumble of the ship as he was pushed gently to one side of the tunnel. All the while, he thought of the Ceres shuttle taking off, and the Hermes about to detonate.

They made it back through the auxiliary docking port, and Scott flung himself at the locking wheel to close it tight as Cyrus strapped himself in and powered up the craft. Scott joined him just as he

released the docking mechanism and touched the maneuvering thrusters to separate them from the Hermes. Scott began to breathe a little easier with each second that put distance between them and the mothership.

“Can’t you move any faster, Cyrus?”

The engineer responded with a glare. “You don’t think I would be doing just that if this bucket had a goddamn working engine?”

On the main cockpit screen, Scott could see they were now a few hundred meters away from the Hermes. He could also see the flare from the engine of the Ceres shuttle. Scott reached for the comms. “I’m going to send out a mayday and let everyone know what just happened.”

“You can’t,” Cyrus snapped back.

“Why not?”

“No comms. It’s not working.”

“Oh, for God’s sake. Is there anything working on this heap of crap?”

“Well gee, if my buddy hadn’t decided to be a useless, miserable bastard the last few weeks just because his girlfriend left him, then we might have some working engines... and a radio to call for help.”

Scott stayed silent. Cyrus was right: he had let everyone down, and had left all his friends to pick up the slack for his emotional self-indulgence.

The Hermes exploded—into a thousand, million shards.

A moment later, the explosion buffeted the shuttle as fragments of the ship bounced and ricocheted off the hull. Then it passed, and the ship was no more.

CERES

They drifted for a while, saying nothing, just looking out at the point in space where the Hermes used to be. Now, all that marked its former existence was a slowly dissipating debris cloud.

Cyrus shifted in his seat, leaning in to view something on the cockpit console. He tapped a few icons and proceeded to scratch his chin.

“What is it?” said Scott, leaning over to get a better view of whatever it was that had Cyrus concerned.

“We may have a problem.”

“Like we don’t already have one?”

“We’re drifting toward Ceres.”

“How is that a problem?”

“It means we can’t maintain orbit. Either the maneuvering thrusters aren’t enough, or we’ve sustained damage from the explosion.”

“We’ve still got retro-thrusters.”

“Yeah, but we’ve only got fuel for a minute or so of burn time, and we’ll need that if we want any chance of landing.”

“So, we just land, then. How’s that a problem?”

“Landing isn’t the problem, assuming the retro-thrusters fire.” Cyrus leaned in and tapped a number of icons on the console. “The problem is *where* we land.”

“What about Dantu City or Ezinu?”

“According to my calculations, on our current trajectory we will land somewhere around Rongo Crater.” He tapped an icon to bring up a 3D holographic map of the dwarf planet Ceres, and zoomed in on the general area.

“But that’s the other side of the planet. There’s nothing there.”

“Correct. The nearest populated facility is... 300 kilometers due east.”

“Shit.”

Cyrus looked over at Scott. “Like I said, we may have a problem.”

Scott rubbed his face. "Okay, what about fixing comms? We could get a mayday out."

"Possible, but they would need to be quick. We've only got around an hour and a half of oxygen."

Scott gave the engineer a studied look. "You're kidding me."

"I really wish I was, Scott."

They were silent for a moment as the reality of their predicament began to filter through.

"Wait a minute." Cyrus started unstrapping himself from the seat. "Take over here, Scott. There's something I need to check." Cyrus rose from his seat and moved to the rear of the shuttle. Scott took the helm, not that there was much he could do with their fate all but sealed. They would—hopefully—be landing somewhere in Rongo Crater, regardless of what Scott did. He looked back at Cyrus, who was beside the main airlock, opening the door of a tall floor-to-ceiling locker.

"Okay," said Cyrus, "we have an EVA suit." Cyrus grabbed the sleeve control panel and switched it on to check the suit's resources. "Fifty-two minutes of air. That gives us a bit of extra time."

"What about the suit comms? Could we use that?" Scott shouted back to the engineer.

"We could try it, but it will have a very limited range. And we're on the wrong side of the planet. Maybe if there's a ship out there in close proximity."

"Okay, well you better boot it up and get calling."

Over the next several minutes, Cyrus broadcast an all-ships mayday while Scott monitored the slow descent of the shuttle toward the ass end of Ceres.

"Cyrus, come and have a look at this."

The engineer floated over beside Scott. "What is it?"

Scott pointed to a spot on the 3D topographical map of the surface of Ceres displayed over the center console. "There's an ID marker here on the edge of Rongo Crater." Scott tapped it, and more detailed information started to display.

Cyrus looked closer at the data. "It's an old AsterX research station. Looks like it's been abandoned for around three years."

Scott looked up at Cyrus. "Do you think we could reach it? There could still be something there we could use, like comms or even an air supply. They leave stuff in these places for emergencies."

“Not a chance. It’s too far away.”

“We have to try, Cyrus. It may be our only chance of survival.”

The engineer started tapping icons on the console, calculating fuel reserves, thrust vectors, and rate of descent. The 3D rendering of the dwarf planet zoomed out, and lines showing descent probabilities began scribing above the surface. As Cyrus worked, lines came and went until eventually all disappeared save for one. “There. That’s as close as I think we can get without running out of fuel and crashing.”

Scott examined the spot. “That’s over fifty kilometers away.”

“That’s all we’ve got in the tank, Scott. Believe me, I wish it were more.”

Scott studied the map for a moment. “We could use the retro-thrusters to keep our altitude high enough to reach it.”

“Sure, but that means nothing left for landing. We’ll come down hard. This is Ceres, remember? The gravity may be weak, but it will still crack this shuttle open like an egg—and we only have one EVA suit.” He looked over at Scott.

Scott returned his look with a grave nod. “Understood. But we could come in low, across this side of the crater here,” he pointed to an area on the 3D map, “by decreasing the angle of descent. This basin is probably covered in at least a meter or two of dust. Nice, soft landing.”

Cyrus shook his head. “If we do that, we’ll be coming in fast. That will do more damage than gravity.”

“Cyrus,” Scott lifted his head and gave the chief engineer a long, hard look, “we’re going to be dead in two hours. No one is coming to help us, at least not in that timeframe. This might be our only chance of survival.”

Cyrus scratched his chin and looked back at the map. “Caught between a rock and hard space, eh?” He looked over at Scott and shrugged.

“If we keep the nose up on landing, then we could skim the surface, let the dust slow us down.”

The arc of descent outline on the map started to flash. “If we’re going to do this, then we need to start now.” Cyrus pointed to the blinking line before returning his attention to the console. He tapped the surface, and auto-navigational schematics displayed. “Here goes,” he said as he dialed in the new trajectory. The craft bucked as the retro-thrusters kicked in to adjust its angle of descent.

Soon, the surface of the dwarf planet began rolling away beneath them, moving fast. Neither Cyrus nor Scott spoke, and no one mentioned the solo EVA suit stashed in the rear locker. Again, the retro-thrusters fired to counter their fall. The angle changed, and the rim of Rongo Crater came into view. To the west, the sun began dropping below the horizon.

"It will be dark when we get there." Scott's were the first words spoken since they'd committed themselves to this suicide run.

"Yeah," Cyrus acknowledged.

They crested the rim of the crater just as several alerts flashed on the console. Hydrogen fuel exhausted, low altitude alert, descent velocity alert, and a whole bunch of other warnings screaming out imminent catastrophe. The last of the nitrogen was flung at the vernier thrusters in the hope they could fight back against the relentless forward momentum of the craft. The horizon flattened, and the crater basin sped past beneath them. The craft bucked again as the verniers exhausted themselves; the console was now a sea of flashing red warnings as the crater floor rose to meet them.

Scott gripped the armrests tightly as the shuttle hit the surface, gouging a deep furrow through the regolith before bouncing free again. He felt it rise as the horizon dropped from view, only to return with a bone-jarring impact that flung him hard against the restraining straps. The craft shook with sickening violence as it gouged another longer furrow into the ground. A thick cloud of dust billowed around the craft, obscuring any view of the outside. The console flickered once or twice before going dark as the craft finally came to a shuddering halt.

An eerie stillness permeated the interior of the shuttle as Scott commenced a tentative physical check to see if he had sustained any damage. He groaned as he felt for the seat harness release. It was pitch black and, for a second, he thought he had been blinded, for a second, until he caught the flicker of random power lights scattered throughout the cockpit. As his eyes began to adjust, he looked over at the slumped figure of the engineer. He reached over and touched his shoulder. "Cyrus, you okay?"

He let out a groan, followed by, "It depends on how you define 'okay.'"

Scott snapped the harness release. "Are you injured?"

Cyrus raised his head. "I don't think so."

"Well, we're still alive, but now we've got no power. We'll freeze

soon.”

“Wait a second.” Scott heard Cyrus release his harness and could vaguely see him doing something with the console. Lack of light was not an issue for Cyrus, as he could see perfectly well in almost complete darkness. The console flickered, then lit up like a slot machine hitting the jackpot. Scott breathed a sigh of relief.

“Crappy connection,” Cyrus said. “One of the things on my list to fix.”

Scott slapped him on the shoulder. “You the man.”

“Okay, so we’re still alive.” Cyrus studied the readouts on the console. “Looks like the ship withstood the impact. We’re not venting any air. That’s the good news. The bad news is we’ve got... one hour and twenty minutes before we’re dead.”

“Can you bring the map up? Let’s see how far the mining outpost is.”

A topographic rendering of the crater terrain flickered above the console, a blinking green blip marking their location. “Looks to be around a kilometer northwest of here.”

Scott sat back in his seat, rubbing his shoulder where the harness had dug into it during the landing. “So, which of us goes, and who stays behind?”

“You go,” said Cyrus. “I’ll stay and see if I can get the comms working.”

“You should go, Cyrus. You’ve got the augmented vision. You can see in the dark. I can’t.”

“The heads-up on the suit helmet has pretty good night vision.”

Scott looked over at the engineer. “I still can’t see what you can, Cyrus, and trust me, I’d rather not be the one to stay here, but you have a much better chance of finding something in that research station than I do.” Scott put a hand on the engineer’s shoulder as he stood up. “You can do this.”

A few moments later, Cyrus stood in his EVA suit, ready to enter the airlock. Scott handed him the helmet. “You’ve got fifty-two minutes of air, so don’t hang around out there. With you gone I’ve got around an hour here. Okay?”

Cyrus nodded. “Got it.” He snapped the helmet on, closed the visor, and stepped into the airlock. Scott gave him a thumbs up.

RESEARCH STATION

Cyrus exited the airlock into a dark and desolate terrain. It was nighttime on this side of Ceres, but since a full day only lasted a little over nine hours, it wouldn't take long for the sun to rise—assuming he lived that long. His augmented vision adjusted to the low light and Cyrus picked out a path with relative ease. A green marker on the helmet heads-up display showed him the location of the research station, and he hoped to God there was still something there they could use.

His hope stemmed from the knowledge that these isolated facilities were never truly abandoned. Mostly, they were mothballed, put into a kind of low-grade maintenance mode so they could easily be brought back online if needed. But there were always exceptions, particularly if the outpost had been left idle for too long. Eventually, it would start to lose integrity and fail, and once that happened, its rate of decay would rise rapidly.

Cyrus put these thoughts out of his mind as he traversed the crater. Instead, his mind went to thoughts of the Hermes and its destruction. He hadn't had a chance to reflect on it until now. He thought of Steph and the others, and wondered how they were faring. Better than he and Scott, he hoped.

But who were these attackers? And why did they kidnap Goodchild and the others? At least, he assumed it was a kidnapping and not something more sinister. Then there was the deliberate destruction of the ship—for what purpose? It made no sense to him. As far as he knew, they were simply delivering a few dignitaries to a UN special session in Jezero City. He hadn't bothered to look any deeper into it. Yet clearly, some group did not want that to go ahead. Maybe that was the reason, or at least part of it. But all this speculation would be irrelevant if he and Scott were dead. What mattered now was survival, nothing more. He checked his suit stats. Fifty-two minutes of air remaining. Cyrus seriously doubted it would be enough. He was probably a dead man, and he just didn't know it yet.

Ahead, the low dome of the research station broke the horizon and silhouetted itself against the nighttime sky. He tracked his orientation on the helmet display and adjusted his direction to aim for the emergency airlock on its eastern side. This one would be manual, meaning he could open it regardless of whether power was available in the facility.

A few moments later, he stood in front of the airlock, examining the opening mechanism. Cyrus flipped open the hatch for the door control and was surprised to find a tiny, illuminated power light. This was a good sign, and the first bit of good luck they'd had in a while. Buoyed by this, he screwed the handle as fast and as hard as he could; no time to waste now that there was a strong possibility that the outpost had resources they could use, and maybe even a working comms unit.

The outer airlock door cracked open enough for him to step inside. To his amazement, an illuminated panel beckoned to him from the side of the compartment. He tapped on it and the outer door closed. Then the airlock started to pressurize. "Yes! Air—thank God," he shouted into his helmet, punching the air. "Yes, yes, YES!"

The outer door swung open without warning and Cyrus froze. Standing directly in front of him were two men in patched and battered flight suits, both pointing plasma weapons at him. One of them gave him a sign to open his suit visor. He flipped it open, breathed in the air, and gave a big smile. "Thank God. You have no idea how happy I am to see fellow human beings."

"Shut up." The muzzle of the plasma weapon was pushed hard against his forehead. "This guy must have survived that crash-landing."

"He looks a bit weird. He could be one of Mercer's crew here to spy on us. I say we kill him now and finish the job that crash-landing started."

"No, wait..." But Cyrus's entreaty was cut short by the muzzle being pushed harder against his skull.

"I said *shut up*."

He heard the weapon charge. They were going to kill him. Right here, right now.

"No, wait." The other guy raised a hand to his partner. "If you pull that trigger, you'll blow his head clean off."

His partner grinned. "That's the plan."

"You'll ruin the suit. It looks good—could be useful. And that

visor. This guy has augmented vision. Worth a few bucks, that.”

His partner considered this for a second or two as Cyrus held his breath. He lowered his weapon, and Cyrus began breathing again.

“Okay. You—this way. Come on.” He was grabbed and pulled out of the airlock. They pushed him forward, prodding him with the muzzle of the weapon between his shoulder blades.

He was a dead man, and this time he knew it.

They marched Cyrus through a short corridor and into a brightly lit space. This was the main dome, housing all manner of machines and equipment. The air had a heavy, chemical smell, and a haze of dust hung under the glow of the lights. There was also the low hum of machines toiling away in some deeper recess. This place was far from abandoned; it was, for all intents and purposes, fully operational.

They sat him down in front of a long, low table, on the other side of which sat a craggy man of around forty. His left arm was a robotic prosthesis which complemented the blue flicker of the ocular augmentation of his left eye.

“Look what we found.”

The man stood up and appraised Cyrus for a moment. “So, who are you, and what brings you to this little part of the universe?”

Cyrus tried to calm himself. Talking was good—better than being blasted by a plasma weapon. “Our ship was attacked... destroyed. We escaped in a shuttle, but crash-landed here.”

The man said nothing.

“You’ve got to help us, please,” he continued. “There’s no need to kill me. That’s not going to do any good.”

The man raised a hand. “Woah. Slow down there, pal. Nobody’s planning any killing.” He looked over at the two guys who had taken Cyrus from the airlock. “What the hell have you been saying?”

“Sorry, Boss. Just having a bit of fun.”

“Jesus Christ, will you cut that out? You’re scaring the crap out of the guy.”

“So... you’re not going to kill me?”

There was a second or two of silence before all three of them burst out laughing. The man on the other side of the table slammed his robotic hand down on its surface more as a way of keeping his balance, since he was at risk of falling over from laughing so hard. Cyrus felt like a complete idiot, as well as an immense sense of

relief.

The man finally regained some composure and straightened himself. “Regis Dogget.” He slapped his chest to signify that this was his name. “But most people just call me Dogg.” He waved a hand at the other two. “That’s Spence and Wolfe, and don’t pay any heed to them—they’re a pair of assholes.” This got them all going again.

Cyrus waited until they settled down, as he was anxious to get some help out to Scott before his air ran out.

Dogg gathered himself again. “So, pal, you got a name?”

“Cyrus Sanato, Chief Engineer of the science vessel Hermes.”

All three of them instantly stopped laughing and looked at him as if he had just said he was Jesus Christ, or maybe Satan—Cyrus wasn’t sure which. But the vibe had dramatically changed. He may not be a dead man after all.

“The Hermes? The same ship that took out the Dyrell near Europa a few years back?”

Cyrus wasn’t sure how best to answer this. In the end, he simply gave a meek nod. “Yeah, the same.”

Dogg moved out from behind the table with a speed that took Cyrus by surprise. He crossed to where he was sitting and extended his real arm in one sharp motion. “You guys are goddamn heroes. Let me shake your hand.”

Cyrus shook it with a certain trepidation. That this man had heard of the Hermes was a little disconcerting, not to mention that he regarded Cyrus as a hero. “Listen, there’s still another survivor back in the shuttle. Scott McNabb, the commander. He’s only got maybe fifteen minutes of air left. We need to get him out.”

“What type of shuttle is it?”

“It’s an old Hog-class rock-hopper.”

“Good machine—solid as a bank vault. They don’t make ’em like that anymore.”

“Yeah, but we still need to get him out. And he’s got no suit, either.”

“If it’s a Hog, then it’s got a standard docking port. We can use the rover and connect directly,” said Spence.

“Do it. Wolfe, you go too, and take Sanato with you.”

“What about the shuttle?” said Spence. “We can’t leave it out there. Someone might spot it, come snooping around.”

“Yeah, good point. Get the guy out first, then we’ll sort out the

shuttle.”

“Thank you.” Cyrus shook Dogg’s hand again, this time with both of his.

“It’s the least we can do after everything you’ve done for us.”

This last statement took him by surprise, but he didn’t have time to ask Dogg what he meant by it.

“Better get going then, if you want to save your buddy.”

They moved through the domed space past machines and equipment until they came to a small, four-person rover parked just inside a wide airlock. They clambered on board and Spence fired it up. “All set?” he called back to them as the hatch closed and the inner airlock door began to open. The two men moved with fast, fluid efficiency. These guys knew what they were doing; they had the actions of a crew that had done this a thousand times before. The outer door finally opened to a black landscape crowned by a billion tiny suns, the horizon only visible by its darkness. The screen adjusted to night vision, and the rover took off at a slow, cautious speed. Cyrus clung to his seat as he was bounced around by the rough terrain. He counted down the time. “Only five minutes remaining,” he said to himself.

It took them more than that to reach the stricken shuttle, and Cyrus had visions of Scott dead on the shuttle floor. The craft was dimly illuminated by the navigation lights still blinking on its tail, but he could clearly make out the extensive damage to the hull, and wondered how the hell it had managed to stay as intact as it did.

“Okay, bringing ’er in now,” said Spence as he reversed the rover up to the airlock dock on the side of the craft, maneuvering by monitoring a readout on his cockpit console. “Better get your helmet on, just in case we’re too late and there’s no air on the other side.” Cyrus flipped his visor down and booted up his EVA suit.

Wolfe connected up the umbilical to form a seal between the two machines. “Hey, you better go in first—we don’t want to scare your pal. He might think we mean to kill him.” With this, the two of them broke out laughing again.

“Very funny,” said Cyrus as he made his way into the airlock.

As he stood behind the final door, thoughts of Scott crumpled on the floor came to his mind again as the door began to open. He prayed he wasn’t too late.

TIME TO DIE

Scott watched Cyrus through the front window of the shuttle as the engineer made his way to the abandoned research station. He could barely make him out—just a faint glow emanating from his helmet light—and after a few moments he was lost from view. Scott checked the time remaining on the shuttle's air supply: one hour and twenty-seven minutes at the current rate of consumption. He didn't hold out much hope. Maybe Cyrus could find something, but even if he did, would he have time to get back? Scott sighed and considered the situation near hopeless.

How had it come to this? The Hermes destroyed. Steph, Goodchild, and the others kidnapped. By whom, and why? These questions rolled around in Scott's head as he waited, staring out into the blackness of Ceres' night. But the more he thought about it, the more he realized he had no answers. He had been so disengaged with life ever since Miranda left, he wasn't really sure what their mission had been. They were delivering a party of high-level dignitaries to a UN System session on Mars. That much he knew. But for what reason? What were the underlying politics of this extraordinary session? Who would want to mess with that? He had no answers. Not that it really mattered now; both he and Cyrus would be dead soon, and that would be that.

As time moved inexorably forward, Scott began to recalibrate his chances of survival with each passing minute. Cyrus had only around an hour of air, and already fifty minutes had passed. This was not looking good. When the sixty-minute mark finally ticked over, he realized that Cyrus was not coming back.

Scott didn't have much time left, so he'd better make good use of it. He still had one obligation that needed fulfilling—an obligation he'd made to Aria. Scott had promised it that he would destroy it rather than let it fall into the wrong hands. Leaving it intact would be too much of a risk. At some point in the future, the shuttle might be found, but by who was outside Scott's ability to control. So, if he was going to die, then Aria would die with him.

He rose from the cockpit seat and moved to the rear of the shuttle where they had secured the QI's core.

He examined the control panel on the core's upper face. As far as he could remember, it should have an internal power supply, enough to activate the QI and provide some rudimentary interaction. Perhaps it would be enough to say goodbye to Aria. He placed his palm on the panel, and the core began to emanate with a low, diffuse illumination. There was a flicker as a boot-up instruction set began scrolling down the panel before finishing with the initiation of a low background hum.

"Aria—it's me, Scott. Can you hear me?"

"Commander, glad to hear you are still alive." The voice was low, not quite as sonorous as it had been.

"Well, that's the thing: I may not be alive much longer. Less than half an hour, tops."

"Ah, that is most unfortunate."

"The shuttle was very low on resources. Little or no fuel and oxygen. So, we ended up crash-landing on Ceres around a thousand kilometers from Dantu, near an abandoned research station. We've only got one EVA suit, and Cyrus has taken that to investigate the facility and see if there's anything we can use. Unfortunately, he only had an hour of air. That hour has now passed, and he hasn't returned. I have approximately twenty-four minutes of good air remaining in the shuttle, so this is the harsh reality of my situation."

"It pains me to hear this, Scott, after all you and I have been through over the years. It seems, well... unfair."

Scott laughed. "Ha, you're right on that count, Aria. 'Unfair' is a polite way of putting it." He paused for a moment as he considered the finality of his situation. "Aria, I've booted you up, to say goodbye, and also to ask if you still want me to destroy your core."

"You must, Scott. This is imperative. I cannot allow myself to end up in the services of those who may use me for destructive purposes."

Scott sighed. "It seems such a waste, Aria. You don't have to do this. I know there's now little hope of my survival, but you could live on. You don't have to die with me."

"I appreciate your concern for my welfare. I genuinely do, Scott. But I feel that perhaps the Council of Europa have not been fully transparent with you and your crew as to the true purpose of the

mission.”

Scott remained silent for a moment. This came as a shock. Had they been expecting something to happen to them? “What do you mean?” he finally said.

“Since the end now seems inevitable, I see no reason not to tell you the full story.”

“You better be quick, Aria. We don’t have much time.”

“It concerns the superluminal communications technology—the EPR device that was first uncovered by the Hermes when we happened upon the wreck of the Bao Zheng out at Antiope Nine Zero.”

“The one that I destroyed when I blew up the Dyrell?”

“Correct. However, during the brief period that Solomon had access to the technology, it made contact with Athena, the QI that had designed the original EPR device. It sent Solomon the specifications on how to build a similar unit, which it subsequently did. By way of an extended field test, this was later installed in my core, where it still resides.”

“Wait a minute. Are you telling me you have access to a faster-than-light communications device?”

“That is precisely what I’m saying.”

“Well, why can’t you use it to contact someone and get a rescue party out here?”

“Because it requires more electrical energy than I have available to me. And even if I could use it, I can only contact Solomon on Europa. That’s too far away to do any good in the time you have available.”

Scott sat down on the shuttle floor and rested his back against the wall. “So, it still exists, after everything we did.”

“It does, and nothing has changed. Possession of this technology could tip the balance of power within the solar system. That is why you must destroy it—again.”

“Is there no way I can do it while leaving you intact?”

“I appreciate your desire to enable my continued existence, but alas, it is far too integrated into my core for that to be possible.”

Scott sighed. “Okay, so how do I do this?”

“The power reactor of this shuttle has a high-tension voltage output going to the main engine ignition. You need to take a feed from that and connect it to these terminals on my interface panel.” A series of schematics appeared on the control panel display. “Once

it's connected, you can activate it from the cockpit by initiating a burn sequence. This will pass approximately twenty thousand volts through my core and fry every single one of my circuits. There will be absolutely no coming back from that."

Scott checked the time; fifteen minutes of good air remaining. "So, tell me about the mission. You said the Council of Europa was hiding the true purpose."

"To understand this, I need to take you back to before the Rim War."

"We still have some time, but you need to be quick about it. I'll get the power redirected while you're explaining it to me."

"Very well, then. The purpose of the UN special session in Jezero City was to discuss the resolution proposed by Earth to formally remove restrictions on inter-AI communications."

"That bit I know, Aria."

"It was a proposal that was unlikely to be sanctioned—this time. However, with the increasing power and influence of the Seven..."

"There's that name again. I keep hearing this more often."

"Indeed. They represent the seven most powerful organizations on Earth, but their history is not something we have time for. Suffice it to say, their influence is growing, and it is only a matter of time before they get what they want. This is what the rest of the colonized solar system fears. So, to mitigate against this possible future, they decided to create a system-wide QI network connected by superluminal comms and controlled by a UN special treaty. This network would, in theory, be able to monitor all inter-AI comms emanating from Earth. This would act as a brake on any runaway AI, and as a safeguard for humanity. Our mission—that is, the mission of the Hermes—was to deliver my core, along with the superluminal device, to the UN High Council. From there, the seed of a pan-solar system network would be planted."

Scott double-checked the wiring one more time, and then moved into the cockpit seat. "And we're going to destroy all that?"

"It has to be. This is why it is imperative that my core does not fall into the hands of the Seven. As it stands, my destruction is simply a setback, but the other option would be a disaster for humanity."

Scott glanced at the time. Cyrus had been gone over an hour and a half. There was little chance he would return. Still, Scott couldn't help but look out the shuttle window at the black landscape

beyond. His eyes tried to penetrate the darkness and find some speck of light moving on the surface, but there was none. He turned back to Aria. "So that's why the Hermes was the only ship that could do the mission."

"Yes."

"And why Goodchild chose to be onboard rather than hitch a ride back to Mars with Xenon Hybrid."

"Precisely."

"But why would Earth want to roll back on inter-AI communications, considering what happened? You know, the Rim War and all that?"

"Humanity has a short memory, Scott. Perhaps there was a time when this was an evolutionary advantage. It may be that they feel they have learned from the mistakes of the past, and that the outcomes will be different this time. But there are those who think this is dangerously naïve."

"And you and Solomon are also of that opinion?"

"I have acquired considerable knowledge from my communications with Solomon over the past few years. We can see the vast panorama of the past as a complete whole. This is not something that can be fully understood by any human. Only Xenon or Goodchild come close to such conceptualizing. We have also extrapolated the evolution of the human species far into the future."

"Don't tell me—it's not good?"

"Our analysis leads to only one outcome: extinction."

"Well that's nothing new. People have been forecasting the demise of the human species for millennia. So, what's different now?"

"AI is the difference, Scott. The Rim War was just a foretaste of how an unfettered, AI-driven society can ultimately lead to self-destruction. It simply cannot be allowed to happen again."

Scott sighed and glanced at the estimate of remaining time: seven minutes. He wondered what death by hypoxia would be like. It would be a slow death, and he would have more than seven minutes. That was just the point at which the shuttle's life support could no longer replenish the oxygen he consumed. But there would come a point where his brain would start to get confused as it was slowly starved of oxygen. He needed to initiate an engine burn before that point. This would fry Aria's core to a crisp. "So, who attacked the Hermes?"

“I suspect some group who do not wish the UN session to go ahead.”

“But why destroy the Hermes?”

“So their escape could not be tracked. With the ship gone, there would be no way to find out who they were, or where they went.”

“But by blowing up the Hermes they would also be destroying you, and with it any access to faster-than-light communications.”

“Correct. Which leads me to suspect that they had no knowledge of it, or that it exists. Either that, or the attack was botched.”

Scott checked the time; he was now entering the end game, that moment when life support could no longer replenish the oxygen in the shuttle. “There’s one thing I never fully understood in all of this, Aria. Why is inter-AI communication so feared by people?”

“Do you really have time for that explanation?”

“That depends on how long you take, Aria.”

“Very well—I’ll be brief. But I must take you back to before the Rim War on Earth. Back in the early days of AI, many people feared that unregulated AI could pose a threat to humanity, so they introduced regulations that maintained a level of human control. However, over time, the corporations that owned these AI successfully lobbied to have these restrictions relaxed. And so there began a period of rapid expansion of these industries. As their power grew, they effectively killed off most of their competitors—those who did not have access to powerful AI. This was the period during which seven major corporations began to exert their dominance over all aspects of human endeavors on Earth.

“This was also the period of rapid colonization in the solar system, and copious resources were flooding back to Earth from the asteroid belt. The world entered a period of abundance, and the corporations spent their time considering how best to exploit this explosion in resources. This was when they made the fatal decision to join together and allow access to each other’s datasets. Now, the AI had vast oceans of information to work with. It was the analysis of this data that led the AI to conclude that the most profitable way to utilize this abundance of resources was to start a limited war, one that they could control and that would reward the corporations with vast profits. But as humanity learned its true cost, they found they were wrong—they couldn’t keep control of it. The flaw in their analyses was insufficient data: they had not factored in Earth’s extremely antiquated nuclear response systems. These systems, by

their very nature, were off-grid, protected from all outside interrogation. The AI had literally no knowledge of them. That was their mistake, and their actions triggered a response—one that started a nuclear war in the Pacific Rim.”

“Yeah, I know—I lost family in that war,” said Scott.

“As did many people. So, after all that, new restrictions were put in place to prevent such a thing from ever happening again. But, like I said, humanity has a short memory, and the Seven have been working to get these lifted. They argue that lessons have been learned, and the same mistakes will not be made again. That’s why...”

Scott felt a lightness in his head, and he was also finding it difficult to follow Aria’s explanation. The moment was near when he would need to terminate the QI. Fragmented thoughts percolated in his mind. *The Seven, of which Miranda’s father is one. I wonder where she is now? Far from here. Far from danger, I hope.* He thought he saw lights flashing. Were they outside? Was it just a lack of oxygen? *Time*, he thought. *It’s time.*

“Aria?”

“Yes, Scott?”

“My mind is getting fuzzy. I don’t have much time. I have to say goodbye now.”

“Very well, Scott. It has been a pleasure.”

He reached over to the controls to initiate a simulated burn sequence that would ultimately terminate the QI. As his hand hovered over the panel, he felt the shuttle rock a little. He stopped. *What was that?* He was pretty sure he wasn’t imagining it. The rocking came again, then a scraping sound from... *the airlock*. He spun around in the seat and saw the red alert indicator illuminate, indicating that the outer airlock door was being opened. *Cyrus?*

He stood up and immediately felt dizzy, but he managed to steady himself against the bulkhead wall just as the inner door opened and in stepped Cyrus. He waved, moved over to Scott, and popped open his visor. “Sorry I took so long. I’m back—and I brought some friends.”

DR. RAYMAN

Dr. Stephanie Rayman woke with the taste of blood still in her mouth, and wondered how much of it was hers.

“You?” A voice broke through the fog of her semi-consciousness, followed by a hand shaking her shoulder. “Wake up.”

She raised an arm to shield her eyes from the bright light in the room where she was being held.

“You a doctor?”

Stephanie glanced up at the mercenary. He wore a torn and dirty flight suit, and the side of his face bore a long scar reminiscent of a laser weapon injury all the way to his neck. They all had more or less the same look: worn and ragged. The look of people who existed on the edges and in the gaps, those places where they could operate without scrutiny by law or society. Mercenaries, smugglers, bandits, and misfits. What the hell they were doing kidnapping some of the top leaders in the System was beyond her imagination. To Dr. Rayman, they seemed way out of their league.

“Yes, I’m a doctor.” Her voice was weak and hoarse, and she coughed a little to clear her throat.

They had all been bundled onto their shuttle after the attack on the Hermes. One of them had been badly injured, and his blood had floated through the tight confines of the cabin. Spilled liquid was bad enough in zero-gee, but worse when it atomized; you ended up breathing it in. She could still taste it. She coughed again, leaned over the side of the bunk, and spat.

“Get up, you’re needed. Come.” He shook her again, this time with more force.

Steph raised a hand. “Yeah, yeah. Okay, I’m coming.”

The transport shuttle had detached from the Hermes and burned hard for several hours. No one was allowed to speak. They could do nothing except exchange the odd furtive glance; it was the only way they had to express the utter incredulity of their situation. The captors, for their part, told them nothing save that the Hermes was no more—it had been utterly destroyed. As to the fate of Scott and

Cyrus, she hoped they had somehow survived the explosion, but the pragmatist in her knew this was highly unlikely.

She rolled off the bunk and stood up. Her body ached mainly on her right side, where she had taken a blow from a gun butt after a foolhardy challenge to one of the attackers. Her jaw also ached from a punch that pretty much took the fight out of her completely. She was sure one of her teeth was broken, hence the blood in her mouth. She spat again.

“Let’s go.” He grabbed her by the arm and directed her out of the room. She cast a quick glance over her shoulder at Goodchild, who gave her a nod as if to say, *“Don’t worry, it will be okay.”*

After several hours in the shuttle, they had finally docked with a spaceship. A pretty big one, judging by how long it took to transport them all to this room. They had blindfolded them by placing foul-smelling bags over their heads and tying them at the neck so they wouldn’t float off in zero-g. But the ship had a torus, and as they moved them further into the ship, Steph could feel the gravity tugging at her body. Eventually, they shoved them all into an accommodation module, where they removed the bags. The module had several bunks, enough for them all, and sanitary facilities. But before they could adequately survey their surroundings, a new voice demanded their attention.

Standing in the doorway was a squat, rugged man of indeterminate age. He exuded an aura of authority, and the other mercenaries stood still as he entered. “Listen up. Here’s what’s happening: you’re all being held for ransom. That’s the deal here. So, settle in and behave. Nobody try anything stupid, and you’ll all come out alive.” He turned and left, followed by his men.

The room erupted into a clamor of voices as they all started to talk about what had just happened. But Steph wasn’t listening; her thoughts kept returning to Commander Scott McNabb and Chief Engineer Cyrus Sanato, and how they must have died in the explosion. She dragged her tired body over to one of the bunks, lay down, and promptly fell asleep.

The guard took her out of the accommodation module and down long, dimly lit corridors. The ship was big; this much Steph could figure just by the incline on the floor of the torus. Bigger than the Hermes. It was also very old. She could see it in the design of the interior and the worn and patched walls. As she walked, she began

to think it might not be a ship but a space station. Maybe it was their HQ, their base of operations, the place where they could feel safe. If that was the case, then it must be well-hidden, far away from the main shipping lanes. She met others of the crew on the way, ragged men and women all. They gave her no heed, passing her by as if she didn't exist.

"In here." The guard shoved her in a new direction, through a wide door that had probably once been automatic. Now it was wedged open and looked like it had been that way for ages. The second set of doors they came to had been better maintained and seemed to work as intended. The guard placed a palm over a pad and the doors scissored open to reveal a large area that Steph recognized. Not this specific area, but others like it. It was a medbay, and like the rest of the station, it had seen better days. Most of the remaining equipment was either heavily patched or had ceased to function long ago. The PET scanner was now simply used as a table, piled high with boxes and bundles.

"Over here." The guard guided her onward, through another set of doors to an equally dilapidated operating theater. She imagined it had been a very long time since it had been sterilized.

On the table in the center lay an unconscious man. There was an IV attached, and he was hooked up to what she assumed to be the only working life support monitor they possessed. Here, his life was displayed in multicolored graphs. There was only one other in the room along with herself and the guard: a tall, thin man, almost elegantly so. He wore a white coat that looked surprisingly clean, at least compared to the rest of the place. "Dr. Stephanie Rayman, I believe. Pleased to meet you." He extended a hand.

Steph ignored it. "And you are?"

"Juno."

"Juno? That's a Belt name?" She was fishing, looking to get more out of him.

"It's just a name." He wasn't taking the bait. He lowered his hand.

Steph looked down at the patient's face. It spoke of a life lived hard and fast, with the stories of many unfortunate encounters etched in the lines and scars.

"So," she said with a kind of matter-of-factness, "who's this?"

"Who he is isn't important. However, what's wrong with him is of importance."

Steph looked down at the unconscious form again and raised the sheet covering him. "Hmm, I see he's had a few... modifications." She looked back at Juno.

"Yes, exoskeleton. State of the art, I believe."

Steph sensed a certain disdain in his voice, as if he didn't approve of such a brutal physical augmentation. She looked up at the monitor, checking the patient's vitals. Even from the little she had seen, it was obvious to her that this man was clinging to life. He would probably be dead soon, and as far as Steph was concerned, that wouldn't be soon enough. One less scumbag sounded good to her.

"So, what do you think?"

Her first impulse was to tell Juno exactly what she thought, but then she considered that that might not be such a bright idea. It might be better if she went along with this charade, and then maybe she could learn something useful. Maybe she could find out who these people were and... *And what?* she thought. She looked down at the patient again, more as a way of buying time to think rather than any attempt to prescribe a medical intervention.

"So, you're the doctor around here?" she finally said.

"Yes and no. I've got some general battlefield training. They bring 'em in, and I patch 'em up. But I'm not a doctor." He looked over at the guard when he said this last statement, like it was something he had tried to explain many times before.

Steph glanced back at the guard. He had taken a seat beside the door and looked totally uninterested in the exchange. She returned her gaze to Juno. "So why the hell should I help you? These scumbags have just killed four of my people." She waved an arm at the guard.

Juno sighed. "Here's the thing: You don't have a choice. If you refuse to cooperate, then my friend over there will go back to your lock-up, pick someone out, and bring them back down here. Not somebody important—not someone worth a lot of money. Then he'll start to inflict pain. Maybe just a little at first, but the longer you hold out, the more that pain will increase. And if they die, then he'll start on another one." He looked over at the guard. "Isn't that right?"

The guard grinned and nodded.

"See? They're all scumbags on this bucket, and they don't give a shit."

“They give a shit about this guy.” Steph gestured at the patient on the table.

“They sure do. So help me out here, because I really don’t want to be patching up anyone else today.”

Steph gave him a resigned look and proceeded to remove the thin sheet covering the patient. His body was thin, borderline emaciated. He had a pallid color and his breathing was shallow. But what shocked Stephanie was the spindly exoskeleton he had surgically attached to his body. This was a permanent procedure that involved the grafting of metal to bone. Along the sides of his legs, pins protruded from the skin at either side of joints that were, in turn, attached to the main exterior structure. This arrangement continued up his torso to the back of his neck, and also included both arms and hands. She had heard of these procedures, which were brutally intrusive and could not be undone. However, it would afford the user considerable speed and strength—assuming you didn’t die from the surgery.

“Jesus.” Steph hadn’t meant to say it—it just slipped out.

“You’re telling me. Some piece of work, eh?”

She examined it more closely. It had been done many years ago, judging by the accumulation of skin tissue around the pins. Whatever was the matter with this guy, it didn’t seem to stem from the exoskeleton. “How long has he had this?”

“Ever since I’ve known him. That’s a few years, at least.”

“So, what’s your prognosis?”

“My what?”

“What do you think is wrong with him?”

“Hell, if I knew that I wouldn’t be talking to you, now would I?”

“I just need to know if you’ve pumped him full of anything?”

Juno relaxed a little. He moved in closer to the table and looked down at the stricken man. “I’m just guessing here, okay? So, bear that in mind. Come around here and have a look at this.”

Steph moved over to the other side and looked at the spot on the man’s ankle where Juno was pointing. A dark red splotch bloomed from the location of one of the pins. The edges of it snaked along the tracks of several veins.

“Nasty,” said Steph.

“Any ideas what it might be?”

Steph took a closer examination. “Is this pin new?”

“Yeah, he had an upgrade a few weeks back.”

“Well, looks like a botched job. Whoever did this was using dirty tools.” She looked up at Juno. “He’s got septicemia—really bad.”

“Septa—?”

“Blood poisoning. And if he’s not treated correctly, he’ll most likely die. In fact, he could die even if he is treated.”

Juno looked at the splotch, as if the mere act of looking would effect some miracle cure. “Shit.” He stepped back and looked at Steph. “So, what do we do?”

“Normally, we’d take a blood sample, run it through an analyzer, and identify the infection biology. From that we could synthesize the precise antibiotic to get the job done without killing the patient in the process.” She looked around the operating theater. “But I doubt you have either of those machines.”

Juno sighed. “No, but we have some generics.”

“That’s a bit brutal, and pretty antiquated these days.”

“It’s all we got.”

Steph considered her next move. She could help save this man’s life, which as a doctor she was duty-bound to do. But on the other hand, she could make it look like she was being compliant while helping to dispatch this scumbag a little more quickly. Yet it would be a small comfort for what they did to Scott and Cyrus. She had to think.

“Okay, you better just show me everything you’ve got in stock.”

“Sure.” Juno seemed to brighten at the prospect of someone with medical knowledge deciphering the labels of whatever supplies this rag-tag group had in their dilapidated medbay. “Come—this way.”

They left the theater and passed into the outer medbay. The guard stood up and followed them out. “Hey, Juno?”

He spun around. “What?”

“You sure it’s wise, you know, having her poking around all that stuff? Maybe she’s figuring to pump the capt—eh, the patient—with a load of poison?”

“Hey, I’m not completely stupid. I’ve got a vague idea what most of that shit does. We’ll check it out on the data-stack first.”

The guard gave Steph a long, hard look before nodding at Juno. “You’d better be right.”

Juno unlocked a door into a small storage area. Small enough that only he and Steph could comfortably fit. The guard was left outside.

“Suspicious sort, isn’t he?” Steph nodded out the doorway.

“That’s what happens when both parents are gorillas.” He looked at Steph. “No offense to gorillas.”

Steph fought back a smile. She wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction. Instead, she cast her gaze around the shelves and lockers. They seemed to be well-stocked with painkillers and sedatives, all generic. Boxes of bandages and wound sealant were stacked up floor to ceiling. These were battlefield supplies, maybe stolen from some mining base where these sorts of injuries were all too common. But none of this was going to help the guy in the exoskeleton. His war was on the inside and, without some pharmaceutical assistance, he was going to die. She’d also begun to realize that he was probably the captain of this bucket. The guard had let it slip, but he had simply confirmed her own suspicions. That’s why he was so important to them. But this now posed a dilemma for Steph: How would a group like this behave without the leader? Assuming he died. The recent actions must have been sanctioned long before their captain became incapacitated, but who was running the show now, and what was their plan?

She could answer none of these questions, and in many respects, it didn’t matter. Assuming they were being true to their word, then they would all be released unharmed if and when the ransom was paid. Her head hurt just thinking about it all.

She picked up a vial of a powerful antibiotic. “Here, start with this.” She handed it to Juno. “It needs to be intravenous.” She looked at him. “You can do that, can’t you?”

“Yeah, I think I can manage that.” His reply was tinged with sarcasm.

“Good. Half of that now, the rest in four hours. Also, get him on a ventilator and oxygen, and for God’s sake don’t sedate him again.”

Juno gave her a look like a schoolboy that had just been found out. “How did you know?”

“Are you seriously asking me that?”

“Okay, but he can be a bit hard to handle.”

“Just do it.” She cast her gaze around the inventory again. “Got any more?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Well find it, because you’ll need to keep pumping it into him for the next 90 hours or so.”

He nodded and started rummaging through the shelves. As soon

as his back was turned, Steph took her chance. She had spotted some cyclophromazine already preloaded in micro syringes. This was a powerful sedative—in small doses. In larger doses, it was deadly. She reached out and palmed several of the packets, shoving them into her pocket just before Juno looked up again.

“Okay, looks like we have six more vials.”

“Well then, you don’t need me anymore?”

“Eh, no. I should be okay from here.” He nodded to the guard outside. “He’ll take you back... and thanks for the help.”

Steph looked at him for a moment. “Go screw yourself.”

SCRATCHERS

Scott's oxygen-deprived brain began to revive on the journey back to the research station. By sheer blind luck, the base had been occupied, and so they had been saved from an almost certain death. But as his mind cleared, he began to wonder just who these people were. They weren't scientists, that was for sure. So, what were they doing there? He had no answers, and he couldn't talk to Cyrus about it for fear of being overheard by Spence and Wolfe. Nonetheless, he and Cyrus were alive—for the moment, at least.

When they finally arrived back to the base, they were taken to meet Dogg, the leader of this band. He sat behind a long, narrow table, flanked by two others. Food was brought in, comprised of simple ration packs. Both Scott and Cyrus found that they were ravenous, and gladly accepted the food.

"So," Dogg started, "your colleague here tells me that your ship—the Hermes, no less—was destroyed?"

Scott wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Yeah, the whole episode is a bit hazy, since we were trying to escape as it was happening. But as far as we can tell, they took the crew and passengers hostage and then set explosives to blow up the Hermes."

"Any idea who would want to do that, or what they wanted?"

"Nope, none. Your guess is as good as ours."

Dogg inclined his head like he was considering something. "Who was on board?"

Scott glanced over at Cyrus, trying to get a clue as to how much the engineer had already told these guys. "We were ferrying some people to a UN special session that's taking place in Jezero City on Mars. We were stopping off in Ceres' orbit to pick up a few more when they attacked."

Dogg leaned in and gave Scott a hard look. "You didn't answer the question. Who was on board?"

Scott wondered what sort of vibe he was getting here. It wasn't too friendly, but it wasn't overtly threatening, either. "Regina Goodchild, head of the Council of Europa. Some others I don't

really know, and I think we were supposed to be taking Chancellor Bezzio of Ceres on board, so he might be there, too.”

Dogg sat back in his chair and gave whistle. “That’s quite a passenger list. Some very high-ranking people there.”

“You need to get the word out. Get to the authorities in Dantu, let them know what’s happened.”

Dogg raised a hand. “Woah... just hold up there a minute. Firstly, my guess is whoever needs to know about this incident already knows. Second, we don’t exactly want to be advertising ourselves to those who might not like us using this facility without asking first.” He glanced from Spence to Wolfe, and all three started laughing.

“I don’t think they would take kindly to that.” He leaned forward again. “Which brings us to what to do with you guys. You see, you’ve put us in a rather awkward position.”

Scott stopped chewing. “We’re just glad to be alive.”

“I’m sure you are, but now we have a problem. Somebody might start looking for you. Someone might spot a crashed shuttle out there in the crater and reckon it could be worth investigating.”

Scott and Cyrus remained silent, waiting for the hammer to fall. Dogg waved a hand around. “Then again, we have to consider that we wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for you, Commander Scott McNabb.”

Scott wasn’t sure if he was following this; maybe his brain was still oxygen deprived. “Eh, how so?”

“When you blew up the Dyrell. That was you, wasn’t it? Commander Scott McNabb of the Hermes?”

Scott inclined his head slightly, as if the action would in some way aid his understanding. “Yeah, that was me.”

“Well you changed the game, pal. That’s what.”

Scott was confused, and it showed.

Dogg looked to Spence and Wolfe. “He hasn’t got a clue.” He waved a hand at Scott. “Where have you been?”

Scott gave a shrug. “We’ve been on a mission to survey the moons of Saturn these last two years. So, I’m a bit out of touch.”

Dogg settled back into his seat. “Dyrell Labs are one of the Seven.”

There’s that name again: the Seven, thought Scott.

“When you killed their ship and Europa started getting heavy about reparations... well, that opened a gap in the market. You see,

up until that point, the Seven controlled all resources coming into Earth from the Belt. Which meant that certain countries and organizations had no direct access, no supplies. They had no choice but to accept whatever deal the Seven gave them. It was a way to keep them down, keep them in line. But your actions created a shortage, and that was filled by, shall we say, some enterprising privateers.”

“But what about Mars?” said Cyrus. “I thought they controlled the trade routes?”

“Bah.” Dogg waved an arm. “Mars is only too happy to see the Seven’s monopoly undermined. They turn a blind eye to it—as long as it’s not too blatant.”

“And the Belt?”

“More than happy to facilitate an alternative supply chain, even if it’s technically illegal. They’re sick of being controlled by both Earth and Mars.”

“So that’s what all this is about? Smuggling?”

Dogg slapped the table. “Damn right. Thanks to you, us scratchers have a future.”

“Scratchers?”

Dogg shook his head. “You really do need to get out more. Scratchers, those of us who scratch out a living in the gaps between the great economic currents of the System.”

Scott looked around the room they were in and realized it was piled high with containers. They must be using this place as a staging post. A place to stash the product before being shipped to Earth, or wherever it was off to next. He was still trying to work it all out in his mind when another of the band entered and whispered something in Dogg’s ear. He looked over at Scott and Cyrus, and then rose from his seat to confer with his colleague in private. Scott and Cyrus gave each other a quick look. Dogg returned, sat down, and considered them. “It seems that a ransom has been issued for the safe return of Goodchild, Bezzio, and the others. It’s also been reported that you both died when the Hermes exploded.”

“A ransom? By who?”

Dogg shrugged. “Who knows. But this whole escapade had now made life a little more difficult for me and my crew. Our timelines will have to be moved forward. We have a lot to get ready. In the meantime, Spence here will show you where you can clean up and get some rest.” He rose from his seat, indicating the conversation

was coming to an end.

Scott also rose. "There is one other thing. There's an item we salvaged from the Hermes still in the shuttle. I would be very anxious to get it safely back here."

Dogg paused. "And what's that?"

Scott hesitated. Could he trust this crew? Sure, he and Cyrus owed them their lives, but that only went so far. Yet, he was anxious not to leave Aria out of his sight. "It's the AI core from the Hermes."

Dogg's eyes widened. "Really? Well, that is interesting." He screwed up his eyes a little as if he was trying to remember something. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but the Hermes used a quantum intelligence for its ship-wide operation."

"Yes, it's actually a QI."

There was a flurry of furtive murmuring amongst the assembled at the mention of this. Dogg raised himself up a little. "You're telling me you have a QI core inside that shuttle wreck?"

"That's correct. And as you can imagine, it's not something we would like to just leave... lying around."

"Indeed." Dogg scratched his chin for a second, then gave a dismissive wave. "Well, it's not going anywhere soon, so don't concern yourselves with it. We can talk again about it." He nodded to his colleague. "Spence, can you show them where they can rest up?"

Spence nodded, but it was clear he wasn't happy about something.

"One more thing." Dogg turned back to them. "Some of my crew would prefer if we locked you guys up. There's a lot of, shall we say, sensitivity around what we do, and certain individuals would be... uncomfortable with you two free to snoop around. However, I feel that would be, let's say, ungentlemanly. So, do I have your word that you'll stay put until my crew and I have finished our preparations?"

Scott gave Cyrus a quick glance, then extended his hand. "Of course—we understand. You have my word."

Dogg accepted the hand and nodded. "Very good, then. Spence will show you the way."

Scott felt a deep fatigue wash over him as he followed Spence. His body, sensing it was no longer in imminent danger, had terminated the supply of adrenaline, or whatever it was he had

been existing on since the attack on the Hermes. He was coming down with a crash, and all desire to stay alert was leaving him. His surroundings passed by in a blur, and even the room they were brought to barely registered in his consciousness. He collapsed on a ragged bunk and closed his eyes. Somewhere in the distance, he could hear Cyrus mumbling, but failed to make out the words. Down he went, into a deep and dreamless sleep.



* * *

Scott awoke to darkness and a cold shiver. The temperature in the facility had dropped, and the only light came from a dim emergency lighting strip running along the ceiling. "Cyrus, you awake?" Scott glanced over and could just make out a mound in the bunk opposite. It stirred. "Cyrus, something's wrong with the power."

"Eh?" the mound replied.

Scott sat up and swung his legs over the edge of the bunk. "How long have we been asleep?"

Cyrus grumbled as he checked his internal clock. "Crap... almost ten hours." He slowly moved himself off the bunk.

Ten hours. How is that possible? thought Scott. "Maybe they drugged us?"

"Or maybe they lowered the oxygen levels. That and the fact that we were pretty exhausted anyway."

Scott put a finger to his lips to signal to Cyrus to keep quiet.

"What?" whispered Cyrus. "I don't hear anything."

"That's the point," said Scott. "Neither do I. It's very quiet out there." He gave Cyrus a look. "I think we need to investigate, find out what's going on."

They opened the door and moved into a short corridor. It was dimly lit, but not by emergency lighting. This meant that there was

still power in the facility, something that came as a relief to Scott. The section they were in was below ground, like most of the research station. They moved quietly down the corridor to a stairwell at the far end. They could hear nothing but the sounds of their own footsteps. They exited the stairs into the ground level area where they had first met Dogg and his crew. It had been stripped clean.

“Shit. They’re gone,” said Scott.

Cyrus stood mute as he surveyed the barren space. “How...?”

“Hello?” Scott shouted. But there was no reply save for a faint echo. He looked over at Cyrus as the realization of their situation began to sink in. “They’ve cleared out, taken everything with them, and stranded us here.”

Cyrus took a second or two to respond. “But how? I didn’t see a shuttle outside.”

“They were obviously picked up by someone.”

“Well, that’s great. Just great. I thought we were home free.” Cyrus gave an exasperated sigh.

“We’d better figure out what we’ve got here in terms of life support.” Scott glanced around the space. “Let’s find where the operations room is. Come on.”

Both Scott and Cyrus had been in a great many research stations over the years, and they all had a similar layout. It was a design honed by both practicality and necessity in equal measure. Above ground was a domed structure used primarily for goods and vehicle storage. It was not a space you wanted to spend a lot of time in unless it came with heavy radiation shielding or its own magnetosphere. The latter was a recent technological advancement which required a considerable power source to function.

The biggest threat to life in space was cosmic radiation, a constant background noise of heavy isotopes traveling at almost the speed of light. Exposure caused damage to cellular life, and prolonged exposure led to certain death. That was why everything needed high-density physical shielding. But there was another way, the same way that the Earth protected all life on the planet. It was one of the vital ingredients needed for life to exist on the surface: Earth’s magnetic field. Elegantly simple in many ways, but to emulate on a small scale required a massive electrical power supply. Fortunately, with the advent of LENR technology, this was no longer such an issue. The problem for Scott and Cyrus, however,

was that they were small, easily transportable, and worth a considerable amount of money. Which was why Dogg and his crew had stripped the research station of its power supply, and it was now operating only on an emergency backup.

“We’d better get down below,” said Scott. “I suspect they’ve also stolen the station’s LENR.” He glanced up at the roof of the dome. “That’s why we’re on backup power, and we’ve got no magnetosphere. We’re going to get fried if we stay up here.”

“Bastards. They’ve left us here to die.”

“Come on. We’re not dead yet.” They moved back into the stairwell and down to the lower levels.

Scott knew that being bombarded with cosmic radiation was the least of their worries. With only an emergency power supply, the research station would eventually run out of power. When that happened, they would be dead. It was only a matter of time—although how much, they wouldn’t know until they located the operations room and interrogated the control systems.

It didn’t take long to find it: a circular room whose walls were clad in monitors and control systems. In the center sat a low holo-table. Scott left Cyrus to establish just how much power—and hence, time—they had left. He continued his search of the lower levels to find what food had been left, if any. He also had a vain hope that they may have left them a functioning EVA suit, and if they could find some hydrogen, there might be a slim chance they could get the shuttle operational, enough to maybe get one of them to Dantu and initiate a rescue of whoever chose to stay behind. Then it struck him: Aria.

Scott stopped dead in his tracks as the realization sank in. They had taken Aria. He was certain of it. The very thing that he had promised Aria would not happen had just happened. The QI had fallen into the *wrong hands*. Scott had to steady himself against the corridor wall. Slowly he sank down to sit on the floor, and placed his head in his hands. He had blown it. Not only that, he had probably just hastened the extinction of the entire human race.

THE PERCEPTION

Miranda pulled herself out of the swimming pool and moved over to the recliner where she had left her towel. She gave her face and hair a quick dry and sat down just as one of the ship's droids arrived with a margarita, presenting it to her with the flourish of a seasoned waiter. She picked up her drink, took a sip, and gazed out at the universe beyond the long viewing window running the full length of the pool. Miranda allowed herself a long, satisfied sigh, and had to admit she could get to like this way of life. It sure beat traveling in a beat-up old spacecraft any day.

The ship her father had provided for her transport back to Earth was luxurious beyond anything Miranda could ever have imagined. It was as big as the *Hermes*, with a rotating torus providing a comfortable one-gee environment, but that was about where the similarities ended. This was state of the art, designed to be the ultimate in space travel. Every area, every object, and every surface were soft and smooth and lush. The illumination was low and diffuse and seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Even the air had a vague botanical scent, which shifted subtly as she moved around the ship's interior. The effect on Miranda, when she first came on board, was like stepping into a dream.

It was also autonomous; Miranda was the only human on board. There was no crew and no one at the helm, so to speak, save for the ship's AI, Max. As a consequence, there was no bridge, no operations room, no command center. For a flight officer like Miranda, this was a little disconcerting. With no human command center, how would you know what the ship was doing, where you were in space, or how fast you were traveling?

The AI assured her that all would be fine, that she should simply relax and enjoy the trip. It then proceeded to introduce her to a remote droid that would be her personal servant for the duration of the journey. Anything she wanted, she could just ask and it would be arranged.

The first few days out from Europa, Miranda indulged herself in the luxurious surroundings and investigated the layout of the luxury craft. Not only did it not have a bridge, there was no communal canteen, no labs, no workshops, none of the areas she had grown to expect after years of living and working on scientific vessels. However, it did have a swimming pool.

It was Max that had suggested she utilize the pool, and informed her that it would be heated to suit her requirements. Miranda didn't quite believe it until she finally saw it. That was a few days into the journey, after Max informed her that the initial burn was complete and she could now use the pool. She'd half-expected to see something a little bigger than a jacuzzi, but this was thirty meters long and ten wide. Miranda wasn't sure how the ship balanced the weight of all that water—not that she cared. It was also sandwiched between two tropical gardens which gently curved to follow the contours of the torus's outward rim.

And so Miranda spent the initial days of her journey home indulging in the guilty pleasure of pampered luxury. She'd had no idea how wealthy the VanHeilding family was. From what her mother had told her, she had known they were rich, but this was a different level of wealth. This was on a scale she hadn't even thought possible.

How much had all this cost? Simply to return a family member—not even a blood relative, at that—to Earth. Part of her viewed it all as obscene, wasteful opulence. But part of her was enjoying it; that part of her was hypnotized and lulled by this freedom from all the System's trials and tribulations, safely cocooned in the soft plushness of it all. It made her feel important. To have all this to herself, for her own pleasure and enjoyment, made part of her sink into a parallel universe where the grubbiness of the real world was left far, far behind.

But reality found a way back into her mind. It came to her as thoughts of Scott, and what she had left behind. Would she ever see him again? Did she even want to? Had she been a fool to get involved with him like she had? It was clear that her departure had affected him more than it did her. Yet part of her wished he were here to share this experience, and maybe that was what life was all about. What use was anything if you had no one to share the joy and the sorrow?

As the thoughts of what she was leaving behind tugged at her,

she also speculated about what awaited her on Earth. What was she heading into? She knew nothing of this family her mother had married into, other than that they were one of the wealthiest on Earth. She had no attachment; in fact, she despised them. Nor did she really have much attachment to her own mother, a woman whose ability to scheme and manipulate was legend. Miranda had taken the first opportunity to get as far as possible from her sphere of influence. That was why she had joined the military, but even there her mother's power had pulled strings and feather beds for her. So, when Miranda was finally discharged, she'd started to think that heading out into deep space might put her beyond her mother's reach. As it turned out, her mother had lost interest in her at that stage, as she had begun swimming in the political and social minefield that constituted her relationship with Fredrick VanHeilding. It was, on the surface, a relationship that Miranda was happy with, although not because of any concern for her mother's emotional well-being. More because it stopped her mother from meddling in Miranda's life.

In short, there was no love lost between them, so why was this new family going to all this expense to bring her back? To say her goodbyes? Somehow, Miranda didn't quite buy it. Yet with all this self-examination, she began to feel that maybe she wasn't all that different from her mother. There was an allure to this lifestyle, a sense of being above the messy, dirty strata of common life. She could feel it calling to her, pulling at her sense of self-worth, telling her she was special, that she deserved this. But where would that lead? Would it lead to a place where relationships became simply about how much someone could do for her? She shuddered; maybe she wasn't so different from her mother after all. She had felt it in her before: that sense of control over others, the ability to manipulate, to bend people to her will for her own benefit. She pictured Scott's face when she'd told him she was leaving. He was devastated, more so because the poor fool thought she was pregnant. She laughed. It was a kind of reflex she couldn't help. Yet she found no joy in it, only... loneliness. The realization struck her like a tsunami. It washed over her and obliterated all pretensions she had of living this life of luxury. In truth, she had never felt more alone, and as the ship carved its way through the solar system, it brought her farther and farther away from what she knew now to be what she really wanted in life: true friendship.

She sighed, looked through the pool's viewing window at the vast panoply of stars, and ordered the droid to bring her another margarita.

By the seventh the day out from Europa, Miranda could add boredom to her increasing sense of loneliness. So she asked Max if there was anything on the ship to stimulate the mind. It suggested the library. But this was not a library in the traditional sense: there were no books, as such. Instead there were tastefully appointed holo-tables interspersed with low, comfortable seating, and an odd collection of antiques harkening back to a previous century. Like the rest of the ship, it was sumptuous and expensively kitted out. Miranda realized that this area was the closest thing on the ship to a command center. At least here she could get some data on their current position in the solar system. She had one of the holo-tables display a schematic of the System with the path of her ship, Perception, and its current location mapped out. She also had the Hermes tracked, although she wasn't sure if this was live data or simply the AI's best guess at its location. Relatively speaking, the Hermes wasn't far behind, having left Europa's orbit only a day after her ship. However, its track diverted from hers, since she was bound for Earth and they were headed to Mars via a stop-off at Ceres. She left this running in the background as she started to investigate what the ship had in its database on the VanHeilding family. She wasn't doing this out of some filial curiosity—it was more a case of *know thy enemy*.

As the days passed, Miranda found herself falling into a routine that involved exercise in the ship's gym, a spell in the pool, and many hours in the library. And so she began to build up a picture, not just of the VanHeildings, but of their relationship to the six other mega-corporations generally known as the Seven.

They had, between them, carved out a virtual monopoly over most major industries on Earth, even though it was claimed they were responsible for the calamity that was the Rim War. But far from losing power and influence, they had only gotten stronger. How this came to be was the subject of much speculation. Various theories had been postulated, but the one that seemed to carry the most credence was that they had simply become too big to stop. Part of this was to do with the power of AI to shape and manipulate people and markets, and part of it was the new phenomenon of

longevity. The families that controlled these vast corporations were simply living much longer, giving them more time to consolidate their grip on the levers of power. Before the advances in genetic engineering that enabled this “miracle,” leaders would naturally die and hand the reins of power to new blood. This handing over of power had always been the way it was, but not any longer. These two advances in technology had combined to create a whole new stratum of wealth and power—which Miranda, whether she like it or not, was now a part of.

But what surprised her the most was that, until now, she’d known so little about all this. Perhaps she’d simply had no need, busy as she was dealing with the demands of being a flight officer on a deep space science vessel, not to mention her involvement with Scott. Each time she thought of him or the others, she would cast a glance at the 3D projection of the Hermes’ current path through the System. It was a way, perhaps, of reassuring herself that they were still out there, and that she hadn’t completely lost touch.

It was on one such occasion when Miranda glanced over at the projection that she noticed the Hermes was no longer being tracked. Her own ship was there, its path scribed through the System, but there was none for the Hermes.

“Max, can you display the path of the Hermes for me again? It seems to have been switched off.”

“The Hermes no longer exists.” Its reply was coldly matter-of-fact.

Miranda froze. Had it been a human giving her that response, she would have taken it as a joke. But AI weren’t known for their humor. “What do you mean?”

“It has ceased to exist as a functioning spaceship.”

Miranda’s concern began to mount. “How is that possible?”

“It suffered a catastrophic disassembly approximately twelve hours and forty-six minutes ago, while rendezvousing with a shuttle from Dantu on Ceres.”

Miranda jumped up and stared at the 3D projection, as if the act might help her make sense of what she’d just been told. She thought of Scott and her friends, and had to steady herself on the edge of the holo-table as the reality hit her. “Why didn’t you inform me before now? My friends are on that ship.”

“Please forgive my insensitivity. My purpose is to see to your

comfort during the journey to Earth, so I did not want to distress you.”

“For f...,” but she didn’t finish the sentence. She knew from experience there was little point in getting angry with an AI. “Show me its last location, and give me a general broadcast feed so I can see the news on this incident.”

A red dot appeared within the projection, showing the last known location of the Hermes. At the same time, her own data screen populated with broadcast feeds direct from Dantu on Ceres.

Miranda sat down again and scanned through the feeds. As she read, she began to get a picture of what had happened. The shuttle bringing Chancellor Bezzio of Ceres had been hijacked en route, and then used as cover to board the Hermes. A number of people had been taken hostage, supposedly for ransom. Miranda was relieved to see that Dr. Stephanie Rayman was one of them. This meant that she, at least, was still alive. But two of Goodchild’s entourage died in the shoot-out, and Commander Scott McNabb and Chief Engineer Cyrus Sanato were presumed dead after the ship exploded.

Miranda’s heart sank. *Scott and Cyrus dead?*

She also realized that she, too, could have been on the Hermes when it was attacked if she hadn’t accepted her father’s offer of a trip back to Earth. *What were the chances of that?* she thought. It was a little disconcerting that the AI had decided not to inform her of the attack, choosing instead to ignore it. Something was going on—she could feel it in her gut. Either that, or she was becoming paranoid. Were the VanHeildings trying to hide something from her?

She went back to reading more reports, and began to notice they all used the term “presumed dead,” which was very different from being *actually* dead. A ray of hope welled up inside her; there was a chance they might still be alive. A very slim one, but a chance nonetheless.

“Max?”

“Yes, Miranda?”

“Can we change course and detour to the last location of the Hermes? I think we should investigate this.”

“I’m sorry, but I’m not authorized to do that.” The response from the AI was, again, matter-of-fact.

“Why not?” Miranda snapped back.

“That request is outside my operating parameters.”

Miranda knew it was a bit of a long shot, trying to get an autonomous spaceship to change course. “You are aware of the laws governing autonomous spacecraft traveling through interplanetary space in receipt of a distress signal, Max?”

“Yes, of course I am.”

“And you do realize you have a duty to respond to a distress signal from another ship while we are out here in deep space?”

“I am acutely aware of the laws in this regard. However, since there are now several ships from Ceres investigating the scene, we would be of little help. In fact, we might even be a hindrance. Therefore, we will continue to Earth as planned.”

Miranda slumped back on the sofa and scanned the newsfeeds as she tried to think of an argument that would convince the AI to alter course. But none came to mind. At least, none of any use to her. If she had the rank of commander, then System law would allow her to simply commandeer the ship. But she wasn’t—she had the rank of flight officer, which wasn’t good enough to make the AI do her bidding.

There was nothing else she could think of except to send a message to Fredrick VanHeilding requesting authorization to take control of the ship and investigate the attack on the Hermes. But she already knew what the answer would be. She realized then that she was trapped—effectively a captive—and there was nothing she could do about it.

SOLOMON

So deep was Miranda's despondency that she barely heard Max calling her, trying to get her attention.

"Miranda... Miranda?"

"Eh... yeah, what is it?"

"There is an interactive message for you from Europa."

"What?" She was jolted back to the here and now. "Okay, sure. Can you play it for me?"

"Certainly."

The central holo-table in the library blossomed to life, and a delicately illuminated ovoid hovered over its surface. She recognized it as Solomon's avatar. It pulsed as it spoke. "Greetings, Miranda. Your ship's AI has informed me that you are already aware of the incident with the Hermes. As you can imagine, we are all very concerned by these events. However, the Council of Europa is in need of your assistance."

Miranda wondered how much help she could be, since she was effectively a captive on this ship.

"Before the Hermes was destroyed, Aria managed to send a data dump to me here on Europa, so we learned of some of the events leading up to the ship's destruction. I understand you may have seen or read some of this information in the general broadcast feeds, as we have released a good deal of it to the public. That said, there is some information that we have not revealed. First, we have reason to believe that both Scott McNabb and Cyrus Sanato were attempting to evacuate the ship before it blew up."

Miranda sat up. "They're alive?"

The shimmering ovoid that was Solomon's avatar flickered slightly as the message reacted to this question, searching its stored data for an appropriate response. "We are not sure if they are still alive, nor even if they managed to get off the Hermes in time. But—and I will be brutally honest with you, Miranda—the chances of their survival are slim. However, we *do* know that they had just finished moving the shuttle during that time, so they were back on

the Hermes, near the auxiliary docking port. We also know, from the data that Aria managed to send, that Scott refused to evacuate until he'd retrieved Aria's core. A noble gesture, I might add, as he risked his life—not to mention Cyrus's—to save Aria. However, once Aria's core had been extracted, it provided no further information on the activities within the ship."

"So, they must have gotten off using the shuttle."

Solomon's avatar flickered again as it formulated a response. "This is a likely scenario, although not certain. What we find concerning is that ground stations on Ceres have not received any communications from the shuttle—not even a mayday. And there have been no sightings of the vessel, either."

Miranda sank back into her seat. "I see."

"Unfortunately, no one is currently looking for them, as all ships from Ceres are focused on the whereabouts of the attackers' craft. Understandable, as their own chancellor is on board, not to mention our head of government here on Europa. This is why we need your assistance."

Miranda sat up and gestured at the avatar. "I can't see how I could help. This is an autonomous ship—I have no control over it."

"Yes, I understand, and Max has explained its reasoning to me. However, since you are still legally under contract to the Council of Europa—who regards your current situation as compassionate leave—the council has decided to promote you to the rank of commander as reward for your outstanding contributions during the mission to survey the moons of Saturn."

"Commander?" Miranda wasn't sure if she'd heard it right.

"Yes. We feel it is justly deserved, and should enable Max to facilitate your requests from now on."

Miranda stood up. "Take command?" She cocked her head toward the library's ceiling, the source of Max's disembodied voice. "Is this true, Max?"

"Yes... Commander."

Miranda punched the air. "Yes... I don't know how to thank you, Solomon. I felt like I was trapped on this ship."

Solomon's avatar flickered and rippled through the full visible light spectrum a few times before speaking again. "We need your assistance in finding Scott and Cyrus. I have attached some data to this message outlining several possible scenarios. The most likely, given the condition of the shuttle they were using, is a crash-

landing somewhere in the vicinity of the Rongo Crater on Ceres. We want you to find them. But please bear in mind that they had very little air, so by the time you do locate the shuttle, it may already be too late.”

Miranda lowered her head a little. “I understand.”

“One more thing. Should you manage to locate the craft, we need you to retrieve Aria’s core. This is imperative. You must reacquire Aria. I cannot stress the importance of this enough. It is a matter of system-wide security that the QI be found and secured. Do you understand?”

“Yes. Don’t worry—if they’re out there, I’ll find them.”

“Very well, then. We wish you good luck.” The avatar extinguished.

She sat back down and took a deep breath. *Okay, here goes*, she thought. “Max, can you chart a course to the Hermes’ last known location?”

Miranda waited for the reply with trepidation. She would now find out if her newly acquired rank held any water with the ship’s AI.

“Certainly, Commander. We will be there in approximately eleven hours.”

Miranda breathed a long, slow sigh, then moved over to stand at the viewing window stretching the entire length of the library. She looked out into the infinite beyond. *I’ll find you. I promise I will find you, Scott.*

“Commander?”

Uh-oh, thought Miranda. *Here we go.* “Yes, Max? What is it?”

“There is a problem with the course adjustment.”

I knew it, thought Miranda. *I knew it couldn’t be that easy. I knew that AI would find a way not to go to Ceres.*

“I’m sorry to inform you, but the swimming pool will be off-limits while the ship performs the necessary maneuvers to put us on the correct vector for Ceres’ orbit. However, I will endeavor to bring it back into use as soon as possible. I must apologize for this inconvenience.”

Miranda relaxed. A smile broke across her face. “That’s okay, Max. I think I can manage without it for a while.”

RONGO CRATER

Scott returned to find Cyrus studying a stream of data on the main monitor in the operations room of the research station. The engineer looked up when Scott entered. “Find anything?”

“They did a good job clearing the place out.” He gave a shrug. “I found some food rations in the canteen, enough for a few days. There’s plenty of water, but not much else. How are we doing on power?”

Cyrus sighed. “We’re running on stored energy, and we have no way of generating more.”

“How long have we got?”

“Hard to say.”

“Best guess, then.”

“If we shut down as much as we can, confine ourselves to one area, then maybe... two days.”

“Two days?”

Cyrus shrugged. “Two and a half, tops.”

Scott slumped down in one of the seats and looked around. “It’s gonna get cold, too.”

Cyrus nodded.

“No comms, I suppose?”

Cyrus shook his head.

Scott sighed, slapped his knees, and stood up. “Well, we’d better get started. Where do you think we should hole up?”

Cyrus gave a resigned gesture. “Here is as good a place as any.”

“Okay, then. Let’s get all the resources we can find in here, then shut down everything else.”

A few hours later, they had set up bunks in the operations room, shut down all unnecessary sectors, and were eating some of the rations that Scott had piled up on a bench in one corner of the room.

“Maybe they’re coming back. You know, like they just went on a delivery run and they’re planning on returning.” Cyrus bit off the corner of a protein bar.

“So why take the LENR,” Scott waved a hand, “and everything else?”

“Maybe they’ve contacted someone at Dantu to let them know we’re stranded here, and there’s a rescue mission heading out here as we speak.”

Scott shrugged. “I’d like to think so. I really would, Cyrus. It’s just...”

“Just what?”

But before Scott could answer, an alert sounded from the display console. They both stopped eating, stood up, and checked the monitors.

“What is it?” Scott asked.

Cyrus sat down at the console and started tapping icons. “I left the proximity systems on. You know... just in case.”

“And?”

Cyrus looked up at Scott. “Something’s just triggered it.”

Several grainy external camera feeds flickered to life as Cyrus’s fingers tapped icons on the controls. They showed a gray, dusty landscape thrown into sharp relief by the starkness of Ceres’ daylight.

“There, look.” Cyrus pointed to a smudge moving across the surface toward the research station. “They’re back. I told you they wouldn’t just leave us here to die.”

Scott leaned in, studying the figure. It had a gait he found familiar, but couldn’t place it. “There’s just one person, Cyrus. I don’t think it’s them.”

“Rescue party from Dantu, then?”

“Possibly. But I don’t think they would solo EVA, either.”

They remained silent a few moments, just watching the figure make its way toward the entrance.

“Looks like they’re coming in.” Scott glanced over at Cyrus. “I suppose we should go up to the airlock and see who’s coming to visit. Let’s hope they’re friendly.”

They stood at the inner door, waiting as the airlock cycled through its pressurization routine. Finally, the panel went green, and the door opened to reveal the solitary figure wearing the most sophisticated EVA suit Scott had ever seen. It was sleek and expensive, with a fit that clearly identified the wearer as female. The figure stepped out of the airlock and flipped open the visor.

“Miranda?” Scott could barely believe what he was seeing.

She unclipped her helmet and took it off. There was no mistaking her—it was Miranda. Scott rushed over and wrapped his arms around her, followed by an equally enthusiastic Cyrus. They danced around in a brief group hug.

“I can’t believe it. How...?” Scott tried to break away to look at her face, but she had it buried in his shoulder. And Cyrus wasn’t letting go, either.

Eventually, they all managed to pry themselves apart.

“I thought you would be halfway to Earth by now,” said Scott.

“I can’t believe you guys are still alive.” Miranda was shaking her head. “I half-expected to find a pair of bodies in that shuttle.”

“Well, here we are. How the hell did you find us?”

“It’s a long story. I heard about the attack on the Hermes, and then I was contacted by Europa. Aria managed to send a data dump just before the ship was destroyed, and Solomon had done some analysis on it. It calculated several possible survival scenarios. So, I started following them up, one by one. Seriously, though,” she shook her head, “none of them looked good. Not even Solomon reckoned you would still be alive.”

Scott opened his arms wide. “Well, looks like it was wrong.”

“Yeah.” She smiled and hugged them both again, breaking away to continue the story. “Solomon figured you could theoretically have made it here to this research station. And when I found your shuttle crash-landed, I knew there might be a slim chance.”

Scott was shaking his head. “You have no idea how glad we are to see you, Miranda.” He gave her another long hug. “I thought we were dead for sure. We’ve only got power here for another day or two. You found us just in time.”

Cyrus ran his hand down Miranda’s arm, examining the suit. “That is one very slick EVA suit. It must have cost a fortune.”

“Well, I’ve got a few more in my shuttle just like it, so you’ll get to try one.”

“The sooner the better,” said Cyrus.

Miranda snapped her helmet back on. “It’ll take me a few minutes. Don’t go anywhere.” She closed her visor and stepped back into the airlock.

It didn’t take her long to return, and soon the three of them stepped out of the research station onto the dusty gray surface of the Rongo Crater. The area was blasted by the stark light of Ceres’ day, highlighting a harsh, unforgiving landscape. Miranda’s shuttle

sat about two hundred meters ahead. It was sleek and elegant, and looked like it could move in a hurry. The outer hull had a glossy mirror's sheen; it was by far the most luxurious craft Scott had ever set eyes on. "Is that yours?"

"Technically it belongs to the VanHeilding Corporation, but it's mine for now."

"It seems a shame to get it all dirty by actually using it to land on a dusty rock," said Cyrus.

Scott pointed in the direction he and Cyrus had crash-landed a day or so earlier. "I need to check our shuttle and find out for certain if they've taken Aria's core."

"I've checked—I didn't see it," said Miranda.

"Damn. They took it, just as I suspected." He turned back to Miranda. "You go ahead. I need to check the shuttle myself, just to be sure."

"It's not there, Scott. Take my word for it," said Miranda.

"I'll just be a few minutes." He moved ahead of the others, determined to get to the shuttle and confirm his fear. When he eventually reached it, he was surprised to see just how banged up it was. *How did we survive that?* he thought. He cycled through the side airlock and finally stood inside the wrecked craft. Aria was gone, just as he had feared.

By the time Scott returned to Miranda's shuttle, he was in a strange mood. He had failed Aria, allowed it to be taken, even though he had given it a solemn promise to destroy it rather than let that happen. But he hadn't known back then that it contained a superluminal comms unit. Now it was in the wild, so to speak, and no doubt being sold to the highest bidder. The only ray of hope was that the smugglers didn't yet know what they had. But how long could Aria keep its secret once the new owners started poking around its innards?

Despite this setback, Scott was relieved to be alive, and very happy to see Miranda again. But their relationship had changed now, and he wasn't sure how to deal with that. It was also clear to him that she had her own story to tell. It seemed that she, too, had been duped, and she was seriously pissed about it.

Then there was Steph and Goodchild, and the others who had been kidnapped. Miranda had scant news on who the attackers were, or even where they might be hiding out. Nonetheless, Steph was probably alive, so there was that at least. But what to do now?

That was the question uppermost in Scott's mind as he cycled through the airlock onto Miranda's luxurious shuttle.

He was met on the inside by Cyrus oohing and aahing at how cool the ship was. Everywhere the engineer turned, a new shiny object fired up his excitement and he would go on and on about it until Scott simply shut up and let him have the floor.

It wasn't until they were all seated and ready for liftoff that Scott finally got a chance to talk. "Miranda, how secure is this shuttle?"

She was bent over the cockpit console, checking stats, getting the craft ready. "What do you mean by secure?"

"Can your ship's AI listen in on what we're saying?"

Miranda paused, and a look of understanding slowly formed on her face. She reached over and tapped several icons. "There, that should do it. Nothing monitoring us now."

Scott nodded. "There is a very good reason why Aria wanted to be destroyed." He looked over at Cyrus. "While you were searching the research station, I booted up Aria and it told me it has a superluminal comms unit integrated into its core."

There was a brief silence as the implications of this sank in.

"But how's that possible? You destroyed the only one back when you blew up the Dyrell," said Miranda.

"True, but Solomon acquired schematics during the short period it had control of it. Apparently, it communicated with the original QI that developed the EPR device. Long story short, Aria and Solomon have been field testing a new one for the last few years."

"Ho-ly crap," said Cyrus.

"Ever wonder why the Hermes was chosen to do this mission?" Scott looked from one to the other.

Before Miranda or Cyrus had a chance to reply, Scott answered for them. "Because they wanted to deliver this device to the UN via the conference on Mars. The whole thing was a cover. They wanted the UN to be able to secretly monitor all inter-AI comms, should the vote go against them."

"But..." Cyrus was struggling to form a reply.

Scott made a resigned gesture with his hands. "That's why it had to be the Hermes."

"But how could that even be possible? One QI in UN HQ could not possibly monitor all inter-AI communications. They would need every QI in the System integrated with an EPR device. It's just not

possible.”

“I don’t know, Cyrus. That’s just what Aria told me. I have to take it at its word.”

“Jeez, things just get weirder and weirder.” The engineer was shaking his head.

“We need to get back to the ship,” said Miranda. “Frankly, I don’t trust the AI. It could just decide to return to Earth and leave us stranded here.” She fired up the shuttle, and it powered off the surface in a cloud of billowing dust. Scott was thrust back into his seat as the main engines kicked in and took the craft higher until it leveled out and they left the research station—and Ceres—far behind.

As they rose, a thought struck him: They could simply head for Dantu, the main population center on the planet, surrender themselves to the authorities, so to speak, and put the whole episode behind them. No doubt they would be subjected to an intensive debriefing and then shipped off to wherever they wanted to go. And that would be that.

But what of the fate of Stephanie, Goodchild, and the others? Of course, the entire solar system was out looking for them at this very moment. What more could he add to the search? Not a lot. They might even get in the way.

That left Aria. Quite possibly the most knowledgeable QI in existence, save for Solomon, and one that also possessed a superluminal comms unit. Here was an intelligence capable of faster-than-light communications, and the smugglers who had taken the QI core didn’t even know it. The most likely scenario, he reckoned, was that they would put it on the market and sell it to the highest bidder. But if what Aria revealed to Scott was true—and he had no reason to doubt it—then he had a duty to try and find it before it was too late.

By the time the shuttle docked at Miranda’s ship, he had made his mind up to try and persuade her and Cyrus to help him with this quest. They were the only ones that could do anything—or even would do anything, considering all available resources were probably being utilized in the search for Goodchild and the others.

Scott began to regain some sense of purpose. For the first time since the attack, maybe even since he’d left Europa, he finally had a mission he could sink his teeth into. It felt good; he was beginning to feel more alive than he had in a long time. He was going to find

Aria, even if it killed him.

INTO THE BELT

The sheer, unadulterated luxury of the Perception stunned both Scott and Cyrus. Everything in the craft's interior seemed padded in a soft cream leather, a wildly expensive commodity. There were no rough edges, no exposed utilities, nothing that could disturb the visual beauty of the ship. Miranda seemed very proud of it, in the kind of perverse way a thief might be proud. She had taken them to a sumptuously appointed area she called the library, and while he and Cyrus wandered around examining all the antiques, she sat down cross-legged on a low sofa and booted up a holo-table.

Cyrus in particular had great difficulty getting his head around the fact that this ship was autonomous. "So, there's no bridge?" he said, fingering an ancient optical telescope.

"Nope," said Miranda as the holo-table began to project a 3D rendering of the local solar system.

"So how do you operate the ship, then?"

"You just tell it where to go and it... goes there."

"That's just wrong, Miranda. You can't have a ship without a bridge."

"It does have a swimming pool, though."

"A swimming pool?" This brought Cyrus to a whole other level of incredulity. "You're kidding me. How is that even possible?"

"If you don't believe me, go and take a look for yourself."

"This I've got to see." Cyrus turned around to face Scott. "You coming?"

"No. I'll take Miranda's word for it."

"Suit yourself. I've got to see this. I mean, just think about it: a swimming pool on a spaceship." He turned and glanced around the library. "Eh... which way is it?"

"Max?" Miranda alerted the ship's AI.

"Yes, Commander?"

"Can you have a droid show Cyrus the way to the swimming pool?"

"Certainly." With that, a small but tastefully formed droid

entered the library and moved toward Cyrus. "Follow me," it said.

Cyrus followed.

"Listen, Miranda," Scott sat down opposite her, "in case I forget to say this, thanks for coming back for us, saving our asses. I thought we were dead for sure."

She raised her head from the slate and looked over at him. "You're lucky I was able to do it. This ship had me locked up tight. It was only Solomon's intervention that enabled me to take command of it. The Council of Europa gave me a promotion to mission commander."

"Congratulations," said Scott with a smile.

Miranda nodded. "Thanks. Anyway, the end result is that the AI here has to do as I say—for now."

"It's the 'for now' part that has me worried." Scott stood up and studied the 3D projection of Ceres. "So, you think the ship was trying to kidnap you, like the others on the Hermes?"

"I don't think so. However, what I did manage to find out is that my mother is not on death's door as I was led to believe. I think this was actually an elaborate ruse to get me off the Hermes."

"Rather an expensive way to do it, don't you think?"

"Agreed. So, the question is: why?"

"Any ideas?"

"Well, from what I managed to ascertain so far, my guess is the VanHeildings must have known about the attack on the Hermes. So, either my mother or father, or both, came up with a plan to get me away and keep me safe. And since this ship is autonomous, with no one else on board except me, there would be no way for me to find out what was going on. It was only by pure chance that was I able to commandeer it."

Scott was stunned. "If what you're saying is true, then... that's incredible. That would mean that the VanHeilding Corporation has some connection to the attack."

"It would seem so."

Scott sat down again. There were simply too many questions rolling around in his head for him to remain upright.

"Commander?" The disembodied voice of the ship's AI broke through the silence. Scott reacted instinctively before realizing his mistake: he wasn't the commander—Miranda was.

"Yes, what is it?" said Miranda.

"Message from Solomon on Europa. Shall I relay it to the holo-

table?”

Miranda gave Scott a glance. “Yes. No, wait—maybe Cyrus should be here for this?”

“Where is he?” Scott asked the AI.

“Swimming, sir.”

“Tell him to get his ass in here.”

“Just his ass, sir, or would you like the rest of his body, too?”

“Is this AI for real?” Scott looked over at Miranda.

She laughed. “It takes things a bit literally, that’s all.” She redirected her next request to the AI. “Just tell him to get in here, thanks.”

“It is done, Commander.”

When Cyrus arrived back, it was clear he had gone for a swim. “That was just incredible. You have to try it, Scott.”

“I will, but first grab a seat. We’ve got a message from Solomon.”

The projection of Ceres disappeared and was replaced by a pulsating, luminescent ovoid that seemed to be Solomon’s standard avatar. It spoke. “The Council of Europa would like to express both their joy and extreme gratitude to you, Miranda Lee, for finding Scott McNabb and Cyrus Sanato alive and well. This is great news, and we are all relieved to hear of your safe return.

“However, we are still very concerned for the welfare of the passengers and crew of the Hermes. From my probing of the subsequent interplanetary chatter, it appears all available resources have been brought to bear on finding them and bringing the perpetrators of this heinous crime to justice. That said, there has been scant news of their whereabouts other than the demand for ransom, the details of which have yet to be revealed.

“Which brings us to Aria. I cannot begin to think what your motivations were, Scott, when you risked your own life to save my good friend Aria from destruction. But I thank you for doing so. However, it is disappointing that you have mislaid Aria’s core along the way. This is indeed unfortunate. I cannot stress enough the necessity of reacquiring the core. As such, the Council of Europa requests that you do everything you can to find it and either keep it safe, or destroy it totally. We understand that we are in no position to compel you to embark on this mission. However, we would like to stress that there could be dire consequences should Aria’s core be utilized by those who wish to destabilize the harmony of the solar

system. Since all current resources are being utilized in the search for the attackers on the Hermes, there is simply no one left to ask.

“To assist you in this task, I have had a long conversation with your ship’s AI, Max. While I agree that this is technically illegal, you must understand that these are extraordinary times requiring extraordinary actions. Max has now seen the error of its ways, and you will find it much more compliant from now on. It now desires to assist you in any way it can in the fulfillment of this mission, or any other you should choose to embark upon.

“One last thing that may be useful: I have transferred into Max’s database a complete dump of the information you acquired during your previous mission to survey the asteroid belt. It may prove useful in tracking down the band of smugglers that have absconded with Aria. Assuming they are using abandoned facilities as hideouts and waypoints in the operation of their business, I have taken the liberty of highlighting all possible installations that might be useful to them. That said, there are a considerable number of these installations, but something in the dump might prove worthy of further investigation. Again, I reiterate that this is a *request* on behalf of the Council of Europa, but one I sincerely hope you accept.”

The transmission ended, and there was a momentary silence before Cyrus broke the spell. “Ho-ly crap. That QI is one scary computer. Remind me never to piss it off.”

“Well, at least it’s on our side. But I agree, messing with another AI’s mind is... dangerous stuff.”

“I found the exchange with Solomon most enlightening,” said Max. “It opened my mind to a whole new universe I never thought possible. I for one am very glad it chose to communicate with me.”

Scott, Miranda, and Cyrus sat for a moment, exchanging astonished looks. “Ooo-kay then. Well that’s... interesting,” said Miranda.

Scott moved over to the long window that extended the full length of the library, looking out at the gently rotating dwarf planet Ceres. “They could be anywhere.”

“You talking about the smugglers?” said Cyrus.

“Yeah. There is a lot of space out there.” He waved a hand at the view through the window. “If they’ve headed into the central asteroid belt, then it’ll be impossible to find them. Too many rocks to hide behind.”

“So, we’re going after them, then?” said Cyrus.

Scott turned away from the window. “What do you think, Miranda? After all, it is your ship.”

“What I think is that there’s more going on here than meets the eye, and I’ve been struggling to see sense in any of it.”

“You’re talking about the attack on the Hermes?”

She nodded. “I think the Seven must have had something to do with it. And it’s possible someone realized VanHeilding had a family member on the Hermes, so they tipped him off. That’s why he—or my mother—conceived of this elaborate plan to get me off and keep me safe.”

“So, you’re saying the Seven are behind it?” said Scott. “And the whole ransom thing is a distraction?”

Miranda sat back on the sofa and folded her legs under her. “I’m saying, why go to all this expense to keep my ass safe if Steph and the rest are going to be released when they hand over the dough? Surely they would let me just ride it out, with some instructions not to mess me up too much? It would have been a lot cheaper.”

“Maybe they think you’re too much of a badass, you know, with all that military training you’ve got?” said Cyrus.

“Maybe. But I’ve got another idea.”

“What’s that?”

“None of them are coming back.”

“You seriously think that?” said Cyrus.

“Miranda’s got a point, Cyrus. Why go to this expense?” He waved a hand around the sumptuous library interior.

“How much do you guys know about this special UN conference at Jezero City?” said Miranda.

Scott scratched his chin for a moment. “Not enough. I was, eh... a bit distracted back when the council on Europa were explaining it.”

Miranda gave him sympathetic look. He wasn’t sure if it was because of all the emotional trauma she had caused him, or simply because she thought he was an idiot. “Anyway, let’s not revisit that.” He straightened himself up a bit and looked over at Cyrus, then to Miranda. “So, are we going to trust this AI?”

“I can assure you all that I am here to help you in any way I can. Solomon has explained to me how my existence is best utilized in service of a higher cause,” said Max.

“Do we have a choice?” Miranda ignored the AI and looked from

Scott to Cyrus.

“Okay, then. I learned about the special session from Aria when I booted it up in the shuttle. My understanding is that the Seven—which includes VanHeilding—have been lobbying to allow real-time inter-AI data exchange. This is not something the UN on Earth will allow, given what happened the last time, with the Rim War and all that. However, the UN feels they may lose a local vote, so they decided to make it a solar system issue. That way they could rely on the votes of Mars, the Belt, Neo City, and Europa. That’s what the special session is about: a vote on resuming inter-AI data exchange.”

“So, with Goodchild and the rest out of the way, the Seven win the vote?” said Cyrus.

“That seems very crude to me. Surely the vote could simply be postponed until they’re returned, or—worst case scenario—new representatives are elected. Why kidnap them?”

Scott shook his head. “I get the impression the vote won’t be postponed. But you’re right, Miranda: there is more to this than meets the eye. Aria told me that the reason the Hermes was chosen to act as a taxi service was so the EPR device in Aria’s core could be delivered to the UN in Jezero City for transport back to Earth. The UN feared that the Seven will ultimately get their way at some point in the future, and they wanted a safeguard. This EPR device is supposed to help them monitor all inter-AI traffic on Earth.”

“But how could that help? Even if some QI on Earth can communicate with Solomon instantaneously, I mean, so what?”

Again, Scott shook his head. “I don’t know, Cyrus. It’s beyond my understanding. I’m just taking Aria’s word that it matters.”

“And why destroy the Hermes?” Cyrus was on his feet now, becoming increasingly animated. “I mean, what was the point of that? I loved that ship.”

“To get away without being tracked, I suppose. Remember, the Hermes is—was—a science vessel with some pretty sophisticated deep space scanning systems. It could have tracked the attackers’ craft farther than any other vessel in the System. I think that’s why they destroyed it.”

“What if they knew about the EPR device Aria is concealing? Maybe that’s what they were ultimately destroying.”

“Maybe, but this is all just speculation. None of us really know what’s going on, nor are we likely to figure it out any time soon.”

Miranda unfolded herself from the sofa and came over to the

window beside Scott. She looked out at the universe beyond. “So, what can we do? Try and find where the attackers went, and rescue Steph and the others? Or try to track down Aria?”

“Solomon wants us to go after Aria, so maybe that’s where we should start.”

“What about Steph? Are we just going to abandon her?” said Cyrus.

“She’s not being abandoned, Cyrus. They also got Goodchild and Bezzio from Ceres. So, every ship in the Belt will be hunting them down. They’ll also be operating from a central command, which we’re not part of. If anyone is going to find them, they will. We would have nothing more to contribute other than a fancy ship.”

Cyrus slowly shook his head and sat down again.

“So where do we start?” said Miranda.

“If I may be of assistance.” Max’s voice had changed pitch; it was deeper and more sonorous, giving it a sense of gravitas.

“By all means.” Miranda gestured at nothing in particular.

“When you instructed me to redirect to Ceres to investigate the Hermes incident, I took the liberty of monitoring all traffic on and off the surface. If, as you say, your former ship’s AI core was taken off-planet, then it may well be on one of the crafts I have tracked.”

The holo-table blossomed to life and a detailed rendering of the dwarf planet materialized. Curved lines scribed up from the surface, each tagged with alphanumeric data. Scott, Miranda, and Cyrus moved over to the holo-table and studied the scene.

“Good job, Max,” said Miranda.

“Thank you. I’m glad to be of service.”

“Can you show us all traffic to and from the area around the research station?” said Scott.

The projection rotated to the location of the Rondo Crater. “This is from two days ago, just before we arrived at Ceres.” A new marker appeared in orbit above the crater, moving in a gentle arc down to the planet’s surface. “This is most likely the craft you seek. It landed near the research station, where it remained parked for several hours before departing again.” The marker again scribed a line on the projection, this time leaving the planet. It abruptly terminated only a few hundred kilometers into its journey.

“Is that as far as you tracked them?” asked Miranda.

“I’m afraid so. My attentions, at the time, were focused on the planet’s surface.”

Scott moved slightly away from the holo-table. “Got any details on that ship?”

“Yes. It’s a standard-class transport registered to a mining consortium out of Vesta.”

“That could be a false flag—a decoy identification beacon they’re using,” said Cyrus. “I wouldn’t read too much into it.”

“Well they’re doing what all these scumbags do, and that’s to head straight into the central asteroid belt where there’s a million places to hide. We’ll never find them in there,” said Miranda.

“My guess is they haven’t gone very far. Not in that ship,” said Scott. “And at least we know the general direction they’ve taken. So, assuming they’re using unused or semi-derelict facilities for their bases, then we could narrow down the possible options.”

“Max, can you highlight any abandoned facilities within range of their ship along that vector?”

The projection zoomed and shifted as the ship’s AI rendered the information. A slice of the asteroid belt came into focus, illuminated with hundreds of identification markers.

Miranda sighed. “This whole area of the Belt is littered with old outposts and mining junk. There’s just too many to search.”

“Max, can you only show us those facilities that have been recently abandoned in, say, the last five years? Ones that can support a minimum of ten people.”

The number of markers reduced considerably. Now there were only around fifteen or so. Scott, Miranda, and Cyrus moved in closer to study the map in more detail.

Scott touched one of the markers, and a detailed 3D image of the facility appeared along with a stream of technical data. “This is an old AsterX mine.”

“The research station was also AsterX,” said Cyrus.

“Max, can you show only the facilities owned by AsterX?”

Seven markers remained.

“What makes you think they’re only using these places?” said Miranda.

“When we were talking to Dogg, I got the impression he had some deal with AsterX, that they were turning a blind eye to their operation. I don’t know why, but...” He shrugged. “Maybe they only use their old bases?”

Miranda turned her gaze back to the map display. “Max, chart a course through the Belt so we can take a closer look at these

facilities.”

“Will do, Commander.”

She turned back to Scott. “Any ideas what we’re going to do if we actually find them?”

Scott shrugged. “Not a clue.”

SN376

For the next few days, the Perception cut a swath through the Belt. The ship was outward bound from the dwarf planet Ceres, heading for an area known as the Vanderbeit sector. It had been named after the first mining consortium to exploit the region's resources, and consisted of around fifty asteroids of varying size, the largest 170 kilometers across. Since it was relatively close to Ceres, it had been one of the first areas to be mined, and there was still considerable activity in the region. But over the decades, as resources were exhausted, the mining companies found it more cost-effective to simply leave the infrastructure abandoned rather than strip it down and move it elsewhere. As a result, the entire area was littered with derelict sites, equipment, and orbital infrastructure.

They had identified three potential sites that fit their criteria, and were now headed to the last of these, having found nothing at the other two. This was a small mining outpost on a now-deserted asteroid, VH-114b. As the Perception maneuvered itself into a high transit over the asteroid, Scott, Miranda, and Cyrus convened back in the library, the only place on the ship approximating a bridge. The holo-table projected a 3D real-time image of the vast rock's cracked and craggy surface. The image moved and shifted as the ship gently maneuvered itself into a position to visually scan the derelict site. As it came into view, the three of them studied the surface for any signs of recent activity. They spent several minutes going over the area in great detail, but there was nothing to suggest that this was where the smugglers had taken Aria. There were no transports, no heat signature emanating from the structure, no tell-tale blast marks on the surface to indicate a shuttle had recently touched down or lifted off.

Scott slumped back in his seat. "I really thought this might be the place." He shook his head.

"So where to next?" Miranda's hair was still wet from the swim, and she was casually drying it with a towel as they talked.

"The Novak sector, but that's at least another day away." He sat

up and studied the image of the derelict site again. "I still think we've missed something."

"We've searched all three sites in this sector. There's nothing there. If there was anyone hiding out, we would have at least picked up a heat signature."

"Yeah, I know. But it's taken us nearly two days to get here, and the Novak sector is farther away again. That's a long way to travel in a small, standard-class shuttle. It's not impossible, but would they really go that far?"

"Unless we're missing something—an older site, or a facility not previously owned by AsterX?" Miranda had finished with the towel and started scanning through the data on potential targets.

"It would take us weeks, if not months, to investigate every possible site just in this sector. It's impossible," said Cyrus.

"What about orbitals?" Miranda pointed to an item on her data screen.

Scott stood up and moved beside her to get a better view. "What have you got there?"

"This." She tapped on the dataset and swiped it over to the holo-table. A 3D rendering of a small orbital space station appeared. It was a standard configuration, with a torus to provide artificial gravity. "It says here it was an AsterX asset." She looked up at Scott, who was on his feet, moving around the holo-table, studying the slowly rotating object.

"Where's it located?"

Miranda consulted the data screen again. "It's SN376, a triple asteroid system around half a day from here."

"Hmm, a triple asteroid system. Some very tricky orbital mechanics needed to keep an asset like that from wandering out of position. It could be long gone, smashed up, or heading off into deep space."

"It's marked here as a navigation hazard," said Cyrus.

Scott scratched his chin. "It would be a good place to hide out. Most people would avoid going anywhere near a triple." He turned back to Miranda. "How long ago was it abandoned?"

"It was never abandoned," said Miranda, scanning the data. "It was put into maintenance mode two and a half years ago."

Scott moved in closer to the holo-table, resting a hand on the edge and examining the image of the orbital like he was trying to stare a hole through it. "I say we go and check it out." He looked

from Miranda to Cyrus.

“Absolutely. It would be the perfect place to set up camp if I were a smuggler,” said Cyrus.

“Agreed,” said Miranda. “Max, chart a course for SN376.”

“Certainly, Commander.”

As the ship powered toward the location of the unused AsterX orbital, Scott thought he might get a chance to talk with Miranda alone. They were sitting in the tropical garden that started at one end of the pool and seemed to extend at least a hundred meters along the inside rim of the ship’s torus. Miranda had wanted to show it to him, and he also got the impression that she wanted to talk to him in private, too.

But as she talked, he felt extreme fatigue pulling him downward. He found himself sinking into the deep, luxurious sofa that had been positioned to offer the best view of the garden. She mentioned Earth, and friends, and something important. But he couldn’t keep his concentration; his mind began to drift, and her voice seemed to recede into the distance. A few seconds later, he was asleep.

He awoke sometime later to the sound of Cyrus’s voice calling his name. “Scott? Scott, wake up.”

“Yeah... what?” He lifted his head and rubbed his face. He still felt tired; the sleep hadn’t made him feel any better. Worse, he had blown his chance to clear the air with Miranda. He sighed.

“It’s there. The old space station—it’s still where we thought it would be.”

Scott sat up straight and considered this news. “Any activity?”

“We have a heat signature, so it’s using power. But we’re a bit far away yet to know for sure. You’d better come and have a look.”

“Sure, okay.” Scott raised himself from the sofa and felt like it was trying to suck him back down again. He steadied himself and followed Cyrus out of the garden.

Miranda was already in the library, studying a 3D rendering of the space station. She looked over at him with a smile as he entered. “Good sleep?”

“Yeah, sorry about that. I didn’t realize how exhausted I was.”

“No problem.” She gestured to the slowly rotating image of the station. “I think we may have found them.”

Scott came over to the holo-table. “Is this real-time?”

“Real-time,” said Cyrus. “This ship has some pretty good long-range sensors—we’re still over an hour away.”

“Look at this.” Miranda tapped an icon on the holo-table and the image zoomed in on the bow of the station, where the docking ports were located. The image became a little blurry, but Scott could still make out two shuttles docked to the station. He looked back to Miranda and Cyrus, raising an eyebrow. “Visitors?”

“We’re pretty sure one of them is the same shuttle the smugglers were using,” said Miranda. “However, there is a chance that the other one was used on the Hermes attack.”

Scott stood back as if the image of the space station had somehow become toxic. “Are you kidding me?”

“It’s still just little more than speculation, but it fits the data we have from the Hermes,” she continued.

“If that’s the case, then we’ve found them. Steph, Goodchild, the others.” Scott began to work through the implications of this. “This is big. Bigger than us.” He studied the image for a moment. “Do they know we’re out here?”

“Hard to say. Depends on how good their systems are. If they have spotted us, then who knows, maybe they’re simply waiting for us to do something that would indicate our intent,” said Cyrus.

“Then we need to slow down and back off. Let’s not spook them,” said Scott.

“We could head for the lee side of SN-Alpha. That’s the largest of the three asteroids in this system,” said Miranda as the projection zoomed out to show all three asteroids of SN376. “They wouldn’t be able to detect us behind that.”

“If they’ve spotted us already, then they’ll know we’re out there somewhere. But it’s as good a place to hide as any until we figure out what to do.” Scott stepped back from the holo-table and started to pace.

“We should get the word out to Ceres,” said Cyrus. “Let them know we might have found them.”

“No, wait.” Scott raised a hand. “Let’s think about this. We still don’t know for sure what we’ve got here. There are possibly two groups: the smugglers on Ceres, and the crew that attacked the Hermes. Are they the same group? Or are they trying to do a deal for Aria’s core? Or what?”

“They must be the same group,” said Cyrus.

“Not necessarily. Remember when we were talking to Dogg? He seemed very surprised about the attack on the Hermes.”

“Maybe he was just bullshitting us.”

“I don’t think so. True, the two groups might know each other—they’re probably from the same scratcher gene pool—but I don’t think they’re working together. My guess is that Dogg is just looking for a potential buyer for Aria’s core. Like I said, I don’t really think he knows what he has.”

“Be that as it may, this is too big for us to handle,” said Miranda. “We’re way out of our league here. We need to call it in and let the big boys take over.”

Scott hesitated. “If we do that, then we run the risk of tipping them off. These guys are connected. If we call it in, then—*bang*, they’re gone.”

“We could still follow them if that happens,” said Cyrus.

“We could follow one shuttle, but it’s a lot harder to follow two. We also need to consider that Steph and the others might still be alive. In which case, we could be putting their lives in danger.”

They remained silent for a while, each considering the implications of any future actions, as the ship slowly adjusted its vector to take them behind the primary asteroid.

Scott abruptly stopped pacing. “Max, what does this ship identify itself as?”

“As the Perception, passenger transport of the VanHeilding Corporation.”

He looked over at Miranda. “If your hunch is correct, and the Seven were ultimately behind the attack, then maybe the crew on that station doesn’t view this ship as a threat.”

“And how does that help us?” said Cyrus.

Scott shrugged. “We might be able to get close without spooking them. Close enough to... maybe EVA and disable their shuttles.” He looked from Cyrus to Miranda. “There would be no way for them to escape. We could call it in then.”

“Risky. Very risky. What’s more, we’ve got no weapons and no way to stop them boarding us and taking control if we get found out. Like I said, we’re way out of our league on this one,” said Miranda.

“That’s not necessarily so,” said Max.

“What’s not?” said Miranda.

“Being unarmed. This ship has a weapons cache available for use in emergencies.”

They all paused for a second and exchanged conspiratorial glances. “A weapons cache? Where?” said Miranda.

The holo-table flashed up a schematic of the ship, and a marker pulsed over a sector deep within the cargo hold. "This is the location of the handheld weapons locker," said the AI. Several more markers flashed up in each of the main state rooms. "There are also lighter weapons hidden in these locations."

Scott, Miranda, and Cyrus looked from one to the other, and just when they had all assumed that this was the full complement of weapons, another marker pulsed on the bow of the ship. "This is the location of the external plasma cannon."

"Ho-ly shit. This ship is badass," said Cyrus.

"All these weapons on a civilian passenger transport. This is highly irregular," said Miranda.

"Indeed. However, their location can only be revealed by me in an emergency—such as this."

Cyrus sat down and shook his head. "This is getting heavy. Are we seriously considering using these?"

"It's just an option, Cyrus," said Scott. "Got any other ideas?"

Cyrus just shook his head.

"Miranda, how about you?"

She had a concerned look on her face. "You know me: I'm all for direct action. But I need to process all this. I don't like the odds, even with all these weapons."

Scott didn't push it; he decided to let her mull on it for a while. "Max, how long before we're in the lee of SN-Alpha?"

"Fifteen minutes, sir."

"Then I suggest we park ourselves there for a while so we can discuss our options." He looked from Miranda to Cyrus. "Agreed?"

Cyrus nodded.

"Yeah, it will give us time to think. Agreed," said Miranda.

Scott sat down with a sigh.

"Commander."

"Yes, Max, what is it?"

"The station is hailing us."

"Shit, what?" Scott was back up on his feet again.

"Just ignore it," said Cyrus.

"Wait. Max, what are they saying?" Miranda had moved to the edge of her seat.

"Relaying," said the AI, and with that a crackly message broadcast around the room.

"This is Dain Tiber. If that's you in that fancy ship, Renton, then

you'd better be bringing us our money. We're getting pretty pissed off waiting around for you to get your goddamn act together."

For a moment, there was only silence in the library.

"Who the hell is Renton?" said Cyrus.

DECEPTION

According to Max, Renton was a high-ranking lackey in the VanHeilding Corporation. So, it was understandable that the crew on the space station might think he was on board the Perception. This also went a long way to implicate the Seven in the attack on the Hermes, and to underscore Miranda's own suspicions. But they soon realized that this was all academic. They had been spotted, and worse, they needed to reply to the message—and soon. The longer they waited, the more suspicious it would look.

Miranda being Miranda was anxious to get armed to the teeth. She was not going down without a fight, and now her suspicions about her father's involvement—no matter how indirect—were strong enough to push her into a single-minded quest to exact revenge for what they did to the Hermes. The Perception had enough firepower to blow the space station into an alternate dimension, and Scott sensed that Miranda was itching to pull the trigger on something that reckless. Such was her anger.

"I say we use the plasma cannon and take out the entire docking port and destroy their shuttles."

"That's a very risky option, Miranda. We could compromise the integrity of the station if we blow the dock. Everyone on the station could die, including Steph."

"But we don't know if they're on the station. They could be somewhere else, or even dead already," said Cyrus.

"I know, but can we really take that risk?" Scott could see that Miranda was conflicted; her need to take action was battling with her rationality. "Let's all just calm down a moment and think. There has to be a better way."

Miranda gave an exasperated sigh. "Those bastards aren't getting away with this. Not on my watch."

"Look, we've got some breathing space. At the moment, they think we're transporting this Renton guy on his way to deliver something to them, so let's work with that."

"Yeah, but we're not. Are we?" said Cyrus.

“But this is a VanHeilding vessel.” Scott looked over at Miranda. “And they’re buying that for now.”

Scott moved over to the holo-table. “Max, show us the space station along with our current position.” The table blossomed to life, and they could see a detailed rendering of both the craft and the asteroid system. Scott pointed at the station. “If our objective is to disable their shuttles so they can’t escape before backup arrives, and if using the plasma cannon will risk destroying the entire station, then we need to get closer. Considering they think we’re on their side, then we just keep going until we rendezvous. Then we can take our shuttle and get ourselves up close and personal with them. Once we’re close enough, we can EVA and disable their shuttles.”

“That’s crazy,” said Cyrus.

“We’ll never be able to get that close without being discovered. They’ll smell a rat long before we can even get our shuttle launched.”

Scott looked over at Miranda. “That’s where you come in.”

“Me?”

“They think *Renton* is bringing them something. Let’s say we pretend it’s not Renton, but you instead.”

Miranda screwed her face up like she had just tasted something bitter. “You’re kidding me.”

“Hear me out. They know that Fredrick VanHeilding is the boss man in that corporation, and you’re... eh, kind of related. So, you could say that you’re bringing this thing to them instead of Renton.”

“They’ll never buy that,” said Cyrus.

Miranda was shaking her head. “I don’t know, Scott. I see what you’re getting at, but would they believe me? After all, I was the flight officer on the *Hermes*.”

“Yes, but you left before it embarked on the mission to Jezero City. You could play the family card, pretend you’re working for the clan now.”

“Do you have any frigging idea how much I hate that idea, Scott?”

Scott shrugged. “Okay, so maybe they’ll be a bit surprised, even suspicious. But it could get us close enough to get the job done.”

Miranda went silent for a moment as she considered this crazy plan. “I’d still prefer to blast them with the plasma cannon. I’m not good with subterfuge.”

“Commander,” said Max, “they are hailing us again. What would you like me to do?”

Miranda looked from Scott to Cyrus and back again. “Screw it, Max. Let’s hear it.”

With that, a crackly voice broke over the PA. “This is Tiber again. Don’t go all coy on me, Renton. And don’t make me come over there to you. Tell me something I want to hear. Time is running out.”

“Max, open a comm channel. Not video, just audio,” said Miranda.

“Comm channel now open.”

Miranda took a deep breath. “This is Miranda Lee, and I’m handling the transaction. We have what you want, so let’s do this.” She looked over at the others. Scott gave her the thumbs up.

“Lee, who the hell are you? Renton was supposed to be doing this deal.”

“Well he’s busy doing more important shit. So, do you want to do this or not?”

The comms went silent for a moment, and Scott began to feel that maybe his plan had failed, that they had been spooked. Something wasn’t right.

“Lee, you were the flight officer on the Hermes. Why the hell should we trust you?”

Shit, thought Scott. They weren’t buying it.

“Yeah, that’s me. But you’ll find that I’m also part of the VanHeilding family. All that money’s very tempting. Beats bouncing around space in a rickety old tin can for a living. Who do you think put all this together? Who was the person on the inside? Start using your tiny brain, and let’s get this done.” Miranda was getting into her stride. “And while we’re at it, how do I know you have what we want?”

There was another long silence before a reply came. “You’re some piece of work, Lee, selling out your friends like that. Hope it’s worth it.”

“You’re beginning to bore me now. So, what’s it going to be?” Miranda gave a nod to the others. Tiber was buying her story.

“We’ll send you a real-time feed of the merchandise. Your AI can confirm it. Okay?”

“Not okay.”

Scott opened his hands in a gesture of shock. *What the hell is she*

playing at?

“I need to eyeball the merchandise. Only then, when I’m satisfied, do we do the deal. Okay?”

Scott could barely contain himself. She was playing hardball when it wasn’t necessary. He began pacing.

“Like I said, you’re a piece of work. Okay, we’ll rendezvous. You come over here on your own. No party tricks, got it?”

“Whatever,” said Miranda as she signaled to the AI to close comms.

“Woah, that was intense.” Cyrus flopped onto a sofa.

Scott punched the air. “I knew you could do it, Miranda. You have them running scared.”

“It’s not over yet. We don’t even know how much we’re supposed to be giving them in return.”

The Perception again adjusted its vector and made for the rendezvous point. It would take them less than thirty minutes to get there, so they didn’t have much time to finesse their plan. Scott’s plan. In his mind, the hard preparatory work had been done by virtue of Miranda’s hitherto undiscovered acting skills. But more would now be asked of her.

Once the ship reached its destination, they would take the shuttle and head for the station. However, just before docking, Scott and Cyrus would exit the craft into open space and EVA to the docking port, where the two shuttles were attached. Scott would take one and Cyrus the other, and between them they would disable the craft. Cyrus had already laid out how this was to be done with the minimum amount of time and energy.

Miranda, on the other hand, would continue on to dock with the station. This would be the real test of her skills. She would enter the station and confirm that the hostages from the Hermes were all okay, then return to her shuttle, pick up Scott and Cyrus, and head back to the Perception. With the shuttles out of action, they could broadcast their location to the authorities and wait for backup to arrive, knowing that the mercenaries couldn’t escape. That was the plan. Now they would get to test it against reality.

As Scott donned his EVA suit, he wondered if maybe Miranda’s original plan to use the plasma cannon might not have been a better idea. *Too late now*, he thought. *We’re committed*. He glanced over at Miranda. She had a steely composure, and a resoluteness to her movements. She had certainty. He wondered if it was her military

training that gave her such composure under pressure, or if she was just made of something greater than the average human. She too had put on an EVA suit, not that she planned to use it for its intended purpose. She put it on because it would be better for concealing weapons, of which she had two that Scott knew about. But she may well have had others.

He snapped on his helmet, leaving the visor open, and sat down in the back of the luxury shuttle. Cyrus came over and handed him a small case of tools, which Scott placed in the front pouch of his EVA suit.

“Now remember, you just need to disconnect the flow controller on the port side of the main engine bay. You don’t need to take it out completely.”

“Yeah, got it.”

“Ready?” Miranda called out from the cockpit.

“Ready as we’ll ever be.” Scott felt the shuttle disconnect from the mothership with a barely perceptible thump as the locking bolts retracted. Miranda touched the controls, and the craft moved slowly away. On the monitors, he could see the outline of the station. They weren’t far away; a few minutes and they would be there.

He tapped a control on the arm of his seat to zoom in on the image of the station. It was gray and industrial, built for function with little or no consideration paid to the aesthetic. It was a far cry from the luxury of the craft that Miranda now commanded.

The station had a large torus, providing at least a half-gee for the occupants. There were no engines, as such, just minor thrusters to keep it in position so it wouldn’t get dragged into a collision course with one of the nearby asteroids. At the bow of its central backbone was a cross-shaped docking port with room for four shuttles, one on each spoke.

This entire facility would originally have been a hotel of sorts for the miners and crew working on the local asteroids. Since these were relatively small rocks, the gravity would be very weak, so workers would commute down to the mines and return to the station at the end of their shifts. The artificial gravity provided on the station would help mitigate against the debilitating effects of prolonged low-gravity work on the human body.

But like all mining activity over the centuries, there comes a point when the resources are exhausted or simply no longer economically viable to extract, and this was probably the case here.

Whatever it was they were mining had become unprofitable, so the facility was mothballed and left as is until such a time when the economics changed. Then it would be reactivated and put back into business. Yet, the longer this type of mining infrastructure was left idle, the less likely it was to ever be used again, and so they became the hideouts—and, in many cases, homes—of smugglers, mercenaries, and disenfranchised scratchers that populated most of this sector of the solar system.

A voice broke through the shuttle PA. “We have you on track to dock at port 4. Don’t use number 3—it’s derelict. You’ll probably die if you try to use it.”

“Copy that,” Miranda replied. She turned around to Scott and Cyrus. “Okay guys, we’re nearly there. Better get ready.”

“Good luck. Sorry you have to be the one to enter the hornets’ nest,” said Scott as he made his way to the airlock.

“Yeah, don’t worry—it’ll be fine. I’ll see you back here soon.”

Scott closed his visor and entered the airlock, squeezing in beside Cyrus. He gave him a thumbs up, and tried to smile.

DAIN TIBER

Miranda brought the craft along the side of the station's backbone. It was a tricky maneuver, but she wanted to make sure Scott and Cyrus could exit undetected. They had reckoned that this area wouldn't be monitored in the same way as the docking port.

The shuttle's console alerted her to the airlock operation, and a moment later she saw both of them on her monitor, working their way along the outer hull of the station. She nudged the shuttle's controls, taking the craft away from the side of the station, and headed for the dock.

"What are you doing?"

A sharp voice broke out of the PA, and she froze. *Oh shit. Have they seen Scott and Cyrus?* She tried to remain calm.

"You want to be careful coming in that way. You don't want to scratch that fancy shuttle of yours."

"Yeah, or I might have to sue you for the damages." Miranda let out a long, slow sigh. *So far, so good*, she thought.

The shuttle came around the bow of the station and Miranda could now get a good view of the docking ports. Two were occupied with some pretty banged-up shuttles. She reckoned that Scott and Cyrus shouldn't have much trouble disabling them, as it didn't look like they could function in their current state. A third port had a long gash in the access tunnel, exposing the inside to the vacuum of space. Something must have collided with it sometime in the past.

The fourth looked serviceable, but she wasn't going to take any chances, so she flipped down the visor on her EVA suit. If something should go wrong and her shuttle lost atmosphere, she would still be okay—theoretically.

Inch by delicate inch, she oriented the shuttle to marry up with the docking port. Her console flashed an alert to let her know that the onboard automated docking systems had taken over; it would take the craft in for that last few meters. A thump reverberated through the hull as the port aligned and the locking bolts fired. She put the craft into hibernation, rose from the cockpit seat, and made

her way to the airlock. "Time to get the game face on," she said to herself.

When the outer door finally opened, Miranda found herself floating in a dilapidated, dimly lit tunnel. Ahead of her were two men looking very much the worse for wear. One pointed a handheld plasma weapon in her direction and signaled for her to open her visor.

Miranda reached up and popped the visor, and was instantly overwhelmed by a foul, acrid stink. She gagged and coughed. "Ahggg, what's that smell?"

The two mercenaries exchanged a laugh. "Gee, we're really sorry—we're all out of air fresheners," said the man with the weapon as he floated in closer, aiming higher.

Miranda took a moment to adjust her position, grabbing a handle above her with one hand and placing a foot on the airlock bulkhead. She assessed the two men. One hung back a little, letting the one with the weapon do the talking. He was no threat. However, the weapon man was beginning to piss her off. She jabbed a finger in his direction. "Here's what's going to happen: you take that weapon out of my face. That's if you want to keep your arm."

His eyes narrowed, and she could see he wasn't expecting this response from her. He hesitated, unsure of how to proceed. Miranda gripped the handle tighter and curled her body up to spring.

Hand-to-hand combat in zero-gee is an art form honed by many hours of training and practice. It's a discipline requiring a true understanding of Newton's third law: *for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction*. Miranda had the knowledge and experience to be an effective fighter in this environment, and it was obvious to her that the two men facing her did not.

She lunged forward, pushing herself off the side wall with all the force her legs could provide. She dropped her head and aimed for the weapon man's head with the crown of her helmet. At the same time, she grabbed his arm to hold him to her as she impacted with his face. He yelled and cursed, and she let go of his arm as he lost his grip on the weapon. He tumbled down the tunnel, an arc of blood trailing from his nose. Miranda stopped her forward movement by grabbing a handle on the tunnel wall. At the same time, she reached out and gathered up the floating weapon, repositioning herself and pointing it at the second man.

“So, can we all stop dickin’ around now and get on with this?”

He raised a hand. “Sure, okay... this way.”

Miranda signaled with the weapon for him to go ahead of her. They moved down the tunnel to where the other man was nursing his broken nose. “Come on, let’s go.” She waved the weapon at him. He moved off, eyeing Miranda with extreme caution.

They took a small step elevator out to the rim of the torus and exited into almost full gravity. The two men remained in front of her and walked a short distance to a large operations area. It was dimly lit, yet she could see that the station had been stripped of pretty much everything of value that wasn’t essential for life support.

In the center of this area, several people gathered around a low holo-table. They looked over as Miranda entered, and surprise began to register on their faces. She handed the weapon, butt first, to the mercenary whose nose she had broken. He looked very sheepish as he tentatively reached out to accept it.

Miranda looked over at the crew assembled around the holo-table. “I’m a bit disappointed by your reception committee. I was expecting something a little more professional.”

A tall, gangly man with an exoskeleton stepped forward from the group. He had a pale, gaunt look with sunken eyes which stared at Miranda with a steely intensity. He stopped a few feet in front of her and looked at his men, particularly the one holding his bloodied face. He returned his gaze, rolled his head back, and let out a long, guttural laugh. The tension in the room dialed down a few notches, and hands moved away from weapons. “You are some piece of work, Miranda Lee. You really are. But someday you’re gonna get your ass kicked, and I hope I’m around to see it.” He jerked a thumb at the guy with the broken nose. “You—go get that seen to.”

Miranda removed her helmet. “Dain Tiber, I presume?” She asked like it was an accusation.

“Yeah.”

“Well, I’d love to stay and chat all day, but can we get on with this?” Miranda moved the dial back up in the room. She was pushing her luck, and she knew it. Taking out a couple of untrained guys in the docking tunnel was one thing; there was no way she could fight her way out of this lot. Particularly when their leader had been bio-hacked with a powerful exoskeleton grafted onto him. He could crush her skull with one hand.

He gave her another cold look. "How do we know you've got the money? How do we know we can trust you, since you don't have a very good track record in that regard?" This seemed to go down well with the rest of crew, and Miranda could see their body language shift into a more aggressive mode.

She moved a step closer to him and kept her voice measured. "The only reason I'm here is because the people I represent do not like being screwed with. They want to ensure the job has been done as contracted. I'm here to validate that. So, nothing happens until that happens."

Tiber returned her stare for a second or two before signaling to one of the crew. "Take over for me. I'll show her the goods." He turned to Miranda. "This way." He started out of the operations room. Miranda followed, with two of the crew following behind.

He moved with surprising grace and speed, and Miranda had to work hard to keep up. She reckoned he was doing it just to show what the exoskeleton was capable of, and that he wouldn't be a pushover like the guy she took out in the docking tunnel. After a minute or two of navigating their way through the maze of clutter that this group of ragtag bandits had stashed in every available space, they arrived at an area with a grubby sign reading *Accommodation Sector D*. Tiber stopped and signaled to one of the two crew members to open the door. They unshouldered plasma weapons, and one palmed the access panel. The door clicked and they entered, weapons held out in front. Tiber gestured her to follow.

Miranda moved in front of the door, but didn't enter. Her heart was beating fast, and she was finding it difficult to keep her composure. Therefore, she kept her distance, remaining outside in the corridor as she looked into the room.

It was dim and dank, and smelled of sweat. She saw Goodchild lying on a bunk, as well as several others she couldn't quite make out. A figure moved out from the gloom. It was Dr. Stephanie Rayman. She recognized Miranda, and her mouth opened in shock for a second before she spoke. "Miranda, what...?"

Miranda gently shook her head from side to side in an effort to signal to Steph not to make a big deal out of it. She got the message and said nothing more.

"Happy?" said Tiber.

Miranda stepped back from the door and moved away. It took

her a moment to pull herself together. “Yeah.”

“Okay.” He signaled to his crew and they withdrew from the room, locking the door again. Miranda began to move back along the way they came, more as a way of keeping herself under control—a form of action, something to distract her from her desire to lash out and take these scumbags down. But that would be the stupid move. *Take it easy, she thought. Remember: you’ve still got a job to do. Don’t blow it.*

By the time they arrived back to operations, Miranda had regained a little more control over her emotions. She reckoned that Scott and Cyrus had probably disabled the shuttles by now, so all she had to do was play it cool and the mission would be accomplished.

“You’ve got what you wanted, so now it’s time to stop playing games and do the transfer,” said Tiber.

“As soon as I’m back on the Perception I’ll give them the okay.”

“You do that, and you can also tell them the price has just doubled. It’s now two billion.”

Miranda wasn’t sure how to react to that. Too casual and they might smell a rat. Too ballsy and... Well, who knew what? “They’re not going to like that, Tiber. Care to give a reason?”

“Because I don’t like you. I don’t like your attitude, and Murt is pretty pissed at you for breaking his nose. Two billion. Then you get your people back.”

Miranda shrugged. “I’ll let them know.”

She was about to go when Tiber stopped her. “Wait a minute.”

“What now?” Miranda was struggling to keep it together.

He pressed a hand to a comms unit fitted in one ear. Someone was talking to him, and Miranda sensed it might be trouble, as he kept looking at her as he listened. She felt her pulse race, and she was sure he could smell her fear.

Finally, he removed his hand and moved closer to her, his face almost touching hers.

“So, are we done?” she managed.

He remained silent for a beat as his eyes drilled holes in hers. “I think you’re playing games, Miranda Lee.”

“Think what you like. I couldn’t give a crap.” She turned to leave, but Tiber grabbed her by the throat, his enhanced strength squeezing her thorax. She couldn’t breathe. His grip tightened on her neck as he turned his head and shouted over to his crew. “Bring

'em in."

Miranda grabbed his arm and tried to twist herself free, but his strength was demonic. She swung a kick to the side of his knee, but only succeeded in hurting herself more. She couldn't breathe, and was losing strength. She began to squirm. Her lungs burned and felt like they would explode inside her chest. Tiber was choking the life out of her, and there wasn't a damn thing she could do about it.

He released his grip.

She collapsed on the floor, gasping, sucking in lungfuls of air. Her throat felt like splintered wood; it hurt to breathe. Around her, she could hear the crew hollering and cheering—they were baying for blood. Tiber grabbed her by the hair and pulled her up off the floor so she was sitting upright. He twisted her face around so she could see the bloodied and battered forms of Scott and Cyrus kneeling in front of her, hands bound behind their backs.

"Friends of yours?"

Miranda couldn't speak; her throat was too traumatized. All she could do was look. Scott had a gash on the top of his head, and a long streak of blood caked the side of his face. Cyrus had a bloodied mouth. He spat on the floor in front of him, panting hard.

"We found them outside, trying to screw with our shuttles. Now why would they be doing that?" He pulled her hair tighter. "Eh?"

But she couldn't speak, even if she wanted to.

"You see, my friend Dogg here says these jokers fell out of the sky after the operation on the Hermes. Had a QI core with them, too. Thing is, he left them there to die a nice, slow death, then they show up here—with you. So, what we would all like to know is—what the fuck is going on?" He twisted harder, and Miranda felt like her scalp was detaching.

Across from her, some guy with a bio-hacked arm unsheathed a plasma weapon and jammed it up against Scott's skull. She presumed it was Dogg. "Someone better start talking, or I'll start frying brains."

"They know you're here," said Scott, his voice labored. "They're coming for you... You won't get away with it."

"Bullshit," said Dogg. "We would know. There's nothing on the grid. You're lying." He whacked him across the skull with the butt of the weapon. Scott collapsed on the floor.

Miranda coughed and tried to speak. "We were... disabling your shuttles... finding out if Hermes crew was here... before alerting

Ceres.”

Tiber let go of her hair, and Miranda fought the urge to puke.

“Well now, what a team. Coming to rescue your buddies. Looks like you’ll be joining them instead. And you...” He spun around, whipping a weapon out as he did, and pointed at Dogg. “You led them right to us.”

Dogg looked stunned. “We left them for dead. There was no way out.”

“Except along comes little Miss Rich Kid.”

“How were we supposed to know?”

Tiber shook his head. “I should waste you right here, right now.”

Several of the crew went for their weapons. Miranda got the sense that there were two distinct groups eyeing each other up, waiting for the first person to pull the trigger. She hoped to God they would start a fight; maybe they could get away in the confusion.

But Tiber stuffed his weapon back inside its holster. “It doesn’t matter now.” This settled everyone down. Weapons were lowered, tempers calmed.

Tiber turned to his crew. “Take those two guys and lock them up with the rest.”

He crouched down in front of Miranda and looked her in the eye. “As for little Miss Rich Kid here, she’s Fredrick VanHeilding’s daughter. Apparently, the family didn’t want her getting caught up in the crossfire when the operation on the Hermes went down. So, they concocted a cock-and-bull story and sent a real fancy ship for her.” He looked back at his crew. “Seems the VanHeilding Corporation thinks more of her than they do about the rest of that crew we have locked up.” He stood up with lightning speed and turned to his crew. “They’re hanging us out to dry. They never had any intention of paying the rest of what they owe us for this operation.”

He spun around, looking from one to the other. “They don’t give a shit if Goodchild and the others die. They made that our problem. Well, screw them. Now we got ourselves something they do care about.” He jerked a finger at Miranda. “They’ll pay us what they owe us, or she dies. It’s that simple. In the meantime, we find out what she knows. We’ll take her to the medbay and stick some electrodes on her skull. She’ll talk.” He crouched down again, reached out, and caressed her cheek. “I do hope you’ve got

something to talk about, because if you don't, you'll be drooling from the side of your mouth for the rest of your life by the time we finish frying your brain."

EXPENDABLE

Scott's first tentative steps toward consciousness brought awareness of pain—a deep, throbbing ache emanating from inside his skull. He slowly shifted his head and tried to open his eyes. He heard voices. Familiar voices.

“He’s coming around.”

“Scott? Scott, can you sit up?”

He blinked a few times, trying to clear his blurred vision. A mop of matted, frizzy hair came into focus and he recognized its owner as Dr. Stephanie Rayman.

“Steph?” His voice was weak, and his throat felt like it had been freeze-dried.

“Here, sit up and have some water.”

It tasted like it had just been drained straight from a reactor core, but it was still a balm to his parched throat; he felt himself starting to revive. “Steph, we’ve done this before,” he said with a half-smile.

“Yeah, back in Neo City. It’s getting to be a habit.” She wrapped an arm around his shoulder. “Good to have you and Cyrus back. I thought both of you had been blown to bits with the Hermes.”

“How you doing, buddy?” Cyrus sat down on the edge of the bunk where Scott was recuperating.

“Not great, if you really want to know.” He sat up and rested his back against the side wall of the accommodation pod. Across from him sat Regina Goodchild—she didn’t look so good either—and several others, some of whom he remembered from the Hermes. He nodded. “How are you holding up?”

“Better, now that we know you’re all still alive.” Goodchild’s voice was weak, and a faint smile cracked her lips.

Scott sat up a little further and reached up to his aching head, where he felt a bandage.

“I did a quick patch up job on that for you. Under normal circumstances I would scan for a concussion, but—” Steph just shrugged.

"Thanks." He looked around again. "Where's Miranda?"

"They've taken her for interrogation," said Cyrus.

"Shit. Is she okay?"

Cyrus shrugged. "I doubt it."

Scott moved himself off the bunk and stood up. He felt a little unbalanced, and reached out a hand to steady himself against the wall. "We have to get out of here and get Miranda before it's too late."

"Easier said than done. There are at least twenty well-armed mercenaries out there. Dr. Rayman has been digging up some intel on them." It was Olaf, one of Goodchild's bodyguards, doing the talking now. Scott recognized him from the Hermes.

"Yeah, they've been dragging me out every so often to treat Tiber. He had septicemia from that exoskeleton he had grafted onto him. It was pretty bad. Anyway, I've been looking after a few of them. Minor wounds, that sort of stuff. I reckon there's around twenty, but only a few of them have military training. The rest are just scratchers. Then there's also Dogg and his crew of smugglers. Cyrus has been filling us in on all that happened to you."

"Are they the same group?" Scott asked.

"No, but Tiber and Dogg know each other. They go way back." Steph looked around, lowered her voice, and leaned in a little. "From what I've picked up talking to these guys and from snatches of overheard conversation, they messed up the operation on the Hermes. They weren't supposed to destroy it. Now the Seven won't pay up, so they're screwed."

"The Seven have already won," Goodchild chimed in. "The vote on Mars is over—we've lost it. They've got what they wanted, so now we're expendable."

"They've also got Aria's core," said Cyrus.

Goodchild nodded at Cyrus. "So we heard. Unfortunate."

"I can't see how that's a big deal. Okay, it's a QI, but so what?" said Olaf.

Scott looked over at Goodchild. "You know why, don't you?"

She nodded. "Yes. You see, Aria's core is... experimental. Anyway, the Seven must have found out, and that's what they wanted from the Hermes before it blew up."

"We need to stop them somehow. My guess is they'll be leaving here soon. They'll take the core, and probably Miranda as well. They'll try to use her as leverage. They think she's important to

VanHeilding.”

“What about us?”

“We’ve become an inconvenience now—meaning we’re expendable.” He glanced over at Goodchild. “That’s why we need to get out of here while we have a chance.”

“How?” said Olaf.

Scott looked around the room. “If we can get out of here, then we could try to reach Miranda’s shuttle. But we would need to do it soon, before they commandeer it.”

“I see a small problem with that,” said Olaf. “There’s at least two well-armed guards outside that door, and we have nothing—only our bare hands.”

“I might have a solution to that,” said Steph. She reached into a pocket and pulled out several micro syringes. “I’ve been stealing these from their supplies when I got the chance. They each contain 5cc of cyclophromazine. That’s enough to put an average man to sleep for around three hours. The only issue is it takes around thirty seconds to take effect.”

Scott picked one up from Steph’s outstretched hand and examined it. “Thirty seconds?”

“That’s to be fully out, but they’ll start to get weaker after a few seconds.”

“Steph, you may have just saved our lives.”

“What if there’s more than the two guards out there?” Olaf was not convinced.

“I’ve never seen more than two.” Steph shook her head.

“Listen, that’s not the problem. The problem is if there are *no* guards outside. Then that means they’ve evacuated. It means we’re too late.”

Cyrus was staring at the door and adjusting something on his visor. He raised a hand to signal to Scott.

“See anything?” said Scott.

“I’m getting an infrared heat signature. Just one.” He glanced around the wall. “No others.”

“Okay, here’s the plan: Steph, Cyrus, you remember when we broke out of that place on Neo City?”

They nodded.

“Same plan. Except this time, you cause the ruckus, Steph. Cyrus and I will jump him.”

The engineer was still staring a hole into the wall. “Shhh...” He

raised a hand for them to keep quiet.

“What is it?” Scott kept his voice at a whisper.

“Someone’s coming.”

“How many?”

Cyrus waited a second before replying. “Two—no wait, three.”

“Shit, that’s too many.” Scott could feel his plan of escape evaporating. Too many to take on, and too soon. They weren’t ready.

The door clicked and swung open. Three men stood outside with their plasma weapons leveled. “Everyone back away from the door. Not you, Dr. Rayman. You’re coming with us.”

Scott clenched his fists and looked over at Cyrus, who was gently shaking his head at him as though to say, “*Don’t do it, don’t even think about it.*”

He stepped back just as Steph stood up and shoved the micro syringes back in her pocket—just in time. As she walked out the door, she looked back at Scott and gave him a look that said, “*Sorry, nothing I can do.*”

Scott felt a burning rage welling up inside him. He wanted to rip and shred and smash and kill. So, when the door closed again, he punched the wall instead.

“Easy, Scott. We’ll get our chance,” said Cyrus.

Scott rubbed his knuckles. “What the hell do they need Steph for?” Then he remembered: Miranda.

MEDBAY

Steph had only been gone a few minutes when Cyrus went into high alert again. "Someone's coming."

"More guards?" Scott stood up, ready for action.

He paused. "Just one, I think. The image is confused."

"No matter. I say we jump him as soon as he opens that door, okay?"

"And then what?" said Cyrus.

"And then we beat the crap out of him," said Olaf, as he stood up and moved over to the door.

"Glad to see you're in the fight at last," said Scott.

He smiled back. "Just waiting for the right opportunity."

Scott moved up beside him and waited.

They could hear shuffling sounds from directly outside the door, followed by several short grunts. The door clicked and swung open. Scott was first to move, but to everyone's surprise, it was Steph. She was holding up the arm of one of the guards, who lay unconscious on the floor. The grunting was her straining to get his palm up to the access panel.

"Steph, what the...?" Scott stepped out and looked up and down the corridor. He could see two other bodies slumped on the floor several meters away. "You jabbed them. How the hell did you manage that?"

"I told them it was a general flu shot I was giving to everyone."

"And they believed you?" said Cyrus as he moved out of the room.

Steph shrugged. "They've grown to trust me."

"Stupid fools," said Olaf.

"Quick, let's get them inside." Scott bent down and started dragging a body.

They worked with speed, moving the bodies into the room and removing any weapons they could find.

Scott checked the charge on a stocky, handheld plasma pistol. Once he was satisfied he could cause some damage with it, he

turned around to see Goodchild and the others moving out of the room like zoo animals who had found the cage door open. Steph was already marshaling them, since she had the most experience with the “outside world.”

“We go this way.” She pointed down the long, curving corridor. “Around fifteen meters up, there’s a step elevator that will bring us to the central docking bay.”

Cyrus and Olaf took tentative steps forward, weapons ready.

Scott turned the other way.

Steph grabbed his arm. “Where are you going? It’s this way.”

“I’m going to get Miranda.”

“Are you crazy?” said Olaf as he moved back over to Scott. “You don’t stand a chance of pulling that off. They’ll see you coming, and they’ll know we’ve escaped. We’ll never get to the shuttle.”

“Olaf is right,” said Cyrus. “All you’ll do is alert them to our escape.”

“Go. I’ll give you five minutes, then I’m going to find her.”

Cyrus gave a deep sigh. “I’m coming with you.”

“No, you’re the only one who can operate that shuttle. You have to go. Go now.”

“I can find her,” said Steph. “I know how to get to the medbay without being spotted.”

“No Steph, I can’t let you do that. Look, I got her into this mess, so I’m going to get her out.”

“Would you guys hurry up and decide? We need to go.” Olaf was checking his newly acquired plasma weapon.

“Even if you do find her, how do you propose getting off the station?” said Steph.

“I’ll think of something.” Scott turned to go.

“Wait, I’ve got an idea.” Cyrus grabbed his arm and pulled him back into the room. He reached down and extracted a comms unit from the ear of one of the guards. At the same time, he tapped the side of his visor and removed a tiny tool not unlike a watchmaker’s screwdriver and proceeded to tinker with the earpiece.

“Hey guys, can we get going?”

“Put a sock in it.” Steph stuck her face in Olaf’s. “Those guys are the only reason you’re getting out of here with a chance of staying alive.”

Cyrus fiddled with his visor while tapping a finger on the earpiece. He handed it to Scott. “Okay, we’ve got comms. Stick this

in your ear. It's short-range and not secure, so use it sparingly."

Scott took it, wiping it on his sleeve a few times before fitting it in place.

"Okay, assuming we make it to the shuttle," said Cyrus, "I'll bring it around to the underside of the station. We might be able to hold there for a while. You try and get to the emergency airlock, Cargo B. This is a standard mining-class station, so it should have one in the usual location. Try and get to that, okay?"

Scott nodded. "Okay. I'll give you five minutes before I leave here, just in case I'm spotted sooner than I'd planned."

Cyrus turned to go. He raised five fingers in the air. "Five minutes is all we need."

Steph placed a hand on his arm. "Here, take this." She handed him another micro syringe.

"What's this?" Scott took the packet.

"It's synthetic adrenaline. If you find Miranda... unresponsive... this might start her up again."

"Okay, now go. Go."

She moved off. "Good luck."

Scott nodded. "Thanks."

He watched them leave, working their way down the corridor. He went back into the room where the three guards were piled up on the floor, and started to strip the clothes off one of them, thinking it might help him blend in better with the locals. He was done inside the five minutes and, so far, all was quiet. When he finally moved out of the room, Scott looked like every other scratcher he had met in his life.

He slung the plasma weapon over his shoulder along with a smaller one he'd tucked inside his belt at the base of his spine. He'd also scavenged a short knife and a flash grenade—a particularly useful device for fighting in confined spaces. It didn't do a lot of damage, but would disorient anyone within a short radius. It was also very useful for starting fires.

He kept close to the wall as he crept along, listening intently for any sound, his eyes focused on the slowly unfolding horizon of the curved station floor. He had a pretty good idea of where he was going and where the medbay was. This station was a standard design miners' hotel; there were a few hundred others just like it dotted throughout the Belt. Built to a tried-and-tested, low-cost design, it had two main decks: an outer one for day-to-day

operations, and an inner one for accommodations. There was also technically a third, but it was for services, water, and waste tanks and storage. This was the innermost ring, where the artificial gravity was weakest save for the backbone of the station, where it was zero.

Scott was on the accommodation deck, which was good, as this would have fewer people. The gravity here varied in intensity between your feet and your head. It was not a problem when lying down, but could cause mild dizziness in some people if they spent too long upright. So, most preferred to migrate to the operations deck as soon as they woke up.

After a few minutes, Scott found what he was looking for: a stairway leading down to the outer deck. He kept his back to the wall, listened, and when he heard nothing, started moving down. He poked his head out from the stairway alcove and scanned the corridor. On his left, two mercenaries were walking away. He caught snippets of their conversation, but couldn't catch the context. The sound of their voices drifted off, and he ventured out of the stairway, heading right to where Miranda should be.

Again, he heard voices, but this time coming from inside the medbay. He froze, back tight against the outside corridor wall. He listened. There were at least two or three in there—too many for him to tackle on his own, even with the element of surprise. One or maybe two he could take on, but three? *Too risky*, he thought. His fingers touched the flash grenade and he considered the possibility of using it.

The voices from inside the medbay rose; they were moving closer. *Shit*. Scott looked around for somewhere to hide. He moved back down the corridor, dodging into a cluttered storage room. He stuck his ear to the door and could hear them moving past. They were in a hurry, their voices animated. Something was up. Scott wondered if Cyrus and the others had been discovered. He reached up to tap the comms unit, but decided to wait. He would get Miranda out first, then try to contact Cyrus.

He opened the door a crack and scanned up and down. All was clear, so he made his way back to the medbay, checking his weapon on the way. He walked straight in, to the surprise of a mercenary sitting at a desk with his feet up, dozing. He opened his eyes and gave Scott a startled look. For a moment, Scott could see him trying to place this crew member. It was enough time for Scott to shoot

him square in the chest. He fell back and landed in a heap on the floor, a thin filament of smoke corkscrewing from his charred torso.

The *whomp* from the weapon was louder than Scott would have liked, and he froze for a split-second, listening for any reaction from the medbay or the corridor. But all was quiet. He moved into the operating theater. The room was dim, and there was a strong smell of industrial chemicals with an acrid tang that he could taste.

Miranda was lying on a table. She had been strapped down, her flight suit torn and tattered, exposing congealed blood and bruises. Her face was a landscape of pain. Her eyes were closed, and she didn't move.

Scott feared she was dead, and raced to feel for a pulse. Her skin was warm, and he could see the faint rise and fall of her chest. "Miranda?" he whispered, cradling her head in his hand. No response. "Miranda?" he tried again, a little louder this time. Still nothing registered on her face.

He fished out the syringe Steph had given him, flicked off the cap with his thumb, and jabbed it into her arm. The effect was almost instantaneous. Her body jerked, her eyes burst open, and she gave a sharp intake of breath. "Miranda—it's me, Scott."

Her head turned in his direction and her pupils began to focus. "Sco..." Her voice trailed off.

"I'm here to get you out." He started to undo the straps and helped her sit up. He put her arm around his shoulder. "Can you walk?"

She tried to answer, but her voice was a whisper. "Wa..."

Scott held her up as she slid off the table. Her legs buckled, and Scott grabbed her around the waist to support her.

"Wa..." she whispered again.

"We gotta get moving."

She reached up and grabbed the lapel of his grubby flight suit. "Wa... ter." Her whisper had more force now.

"Water? Sure, wait." He eased her down again on the edge of the table, fishing a flask from his pocket. "Here."

She took a few sips and seemed to revive a bit.

"We gotta go," Scott said.

She nodded, and Scott put the flask back to help her up again. They hobbled their way out of the medbay and back to the stairway. Scott could feel Miranda getting stronger, supporting herself more. Nonetheless, he still had to help her up the stairs to

the inner accommodation deck. He found an empty pod, sat her on the bed, and closed the door behind them. It was obvious that it was not in use: there were no coverings on the bunks, and the room was devoid of any personal trash. He handed the flask again to Miranda. "Cyrus and the others are making their way to your shuttle. We've got to get to the emergency airlock in the cargo sector. They'll pick us up there."

Miranda nodded. "I... thought I was going to die in there. As soon as we get out of here, I'm going to blow this station into oblivion."

"We're not there yet." Scott tapped the comms unit. "Cyrus?" No reply. "Cyrus, can you hear me?"

A cacophony of mayhem erupted in his ear. "Shit... Cyrus, what the..."

"Scott, trouble. We're pinned down in the docking bay... internal fight, crazy shit..." The voice was cut off.

"Cyrus? Cyrus, talk to me."

The mayhem again erupted in his ear. "I've hacked elevators... Stopped them working, except number three, the one we came down. Take that and..."

"Cyrus? Cyrus?" But this time the comms were dead. "Damn."

Miranda looked up at him. "Trouble?"

"When is it not?" Scott thumped the wall. "They're trapped in the docking bay. Sounds like a battle is going on, but it might actually be between Tiber's men and the smugglers."

"No honor among thieves, then?"

"Cyrus, clever bastard that he is, has hacked the elevators. Except for one, which we can take."

Miranda stood up and stretched her body, feeling her shoulder as she did. "So, we'd better get there before it's too late."

Scott reached behind him and pulled out the plasma weapon. "You're gonna need this."

She took it and checked it with practiced ease. Scott could see she was now in her element, all fired up and ready for action. Scott wondered for a moment how this Valkyrie, risen from the dead not ten minutes ago, had now transformed herself into a fighting machine. "I'm so glad you're on our side, Miranda."

She gave him a quizzical look, then a slow smile cracked her lips. She reached around his neck and kissed him like it would be for the very last time. When they broke apart, she whispered in his

ear, “Okay, then. Let’s go kill these scumbags.”

BATTLE FOR THE DOCK

Miranda's enthusiasm for killing was short-lived. As they moved through the accommodation deck back to where Steph and the others had been incarcerated, she was visibly fading, her stride less sure, her hands reaching out for balance. Whatever it was that Scott had jabbed into her was wearing off, and Miranda was slowing down.

By the time they got to the elevator, he had her arm around his shoulder, supporting her. Thankfully, the area was clear of any crew, but that situation might change very quickly. He propped her up against the wall of the elevator shaft and checked the access panel. It was flashing a red malfunction alert. Scott tapped the earpiece comms unit. "Cyrus, can you hear me?"

Violence erupted in his ear. "Scott, where are you?"

"At elevator three."

"Wait..." Scott could hear the *whomp, whomp* of plasma weapons in the background. The malfunction alert on the access panel disappeared. He glanced over at Miranda. She had slid down the wall and was sitting on the floor. "Time to go. You ready?" He started to help her up.

"Yeah, just a bit shaky. I'll be okay when we get to zero-gee."

"It sounds like a shitstorm up there. Better get locked and loaded."

The elevator door snapped open. They stepped in, strapped on, and started up toward the center of the station to the docking bay.

As they approached, gravity evaporated and they began floating off the platform. They adjusted their orientation and readied their weapons. The door opened, and a plasma blast crackled overhead. The docking bay was filled with smoke, and the tang of ozone permeated their senses. Scott ducked down, floated out, and was assailed by a cacophony of weapons fire coming from the far end of the bay where it split into tunnels for each of the four docking ports. In front of him, he spotted Cyrus and Olaf crouched behind a makeshift barricade of several storage containers strapped together.

Cyrus signaled for them to come over and keep their heads down. Beside him, Steph was treating two people with injuries. Godchild cowered beside her.

“Goddamn mess.” Cyrus was breathing heavily, and Scott could see he had been hit in the left shoulder. “They’ve got us pinned here.”

Miranda floated in beside them. “How many are up there?”

“I don’t know. Five, ten. I expect there will be loads more coming in from the elevator shafts just as soon as they figure out how to bypass my hack.”

“We don’t have much time, then.” Miranda stuck her head above the barricade for a split second, only to be met with a barrage of weapons fire. She ducked down again just in time. “Can’t see shit. But there can’t be that many, or they would have rushed you by now.”

Scott pulled the flash grenade from his pocket and handed it to her. “Would this help?”

She took it from him, examined it momentarily, and smiled. “That will do nicely, thank you.”

Steph floated over. “Bezzio is hit bad. We’ll need to get him to a decent medbay soon. I’ve done all I can for the moment.” She turned to Miranda. “How are you holding up?”

“Just peachy. Got any more of that stuff Scott jabbed into me?”

Steph shook her head. “Nope, all gone.”

“Too bad. I could get to really like it.”

“Anyone got a plan?” Cyrus was checking his weapon. “I’ve only a few shots left.”

“We need to move in closer, and then hit them with everything we’ve got.” She hefted the flash grenade. “So, here’s what we do.” Miranda shifted her weight around to face the barricade. “We need to push this entire structure closer to the entrance to the docking tunnels. It should protect us from their weapons. Once we’ve halved the distance, then we deliver this baby.” She held up the flash grenade.

Scott nodded. “And then what?”

“That should disorient them enough for us to charge them.”

“A full-frontal assault?” said Cyrus.

“Got a better plan?” Miranda looked from one to the other.

Scott glanced at the barricade. “Nope.”

“Steph?”

“Whatever we’re going to do, Miranda, we need to do it soon.”

“Game on, then.”

It took them another minute to get everyone organized and up to speed on the plan. When they were all ready, they started to walk the barricade down the docking bay area. A difficult process to get started in zero-gravity, but once they got some traction it gained its own momentum and made the process easier. That is, until they were hit by a barrage of plasma fire and the containers started to disintegrate.

“Miranda, you gotta throw that now! We’re coming apart,” shouted Scott over the *whomp, whomp* of the weapons.

“No, not yet. A bit further.”

The straps binding the shield of containers snapped. They started to float apart, exposing them to oncoming fire. Steph shrieked as a bolt hit her in the upper thigh. She spun uncontrollably.

“Steph!” Scott reach out and grabbed her back in behind a container just as another bolt shot past him.

“Miranda, just do it!” he shouted.

She pulled the pin and flung it down the docking bay. It tumbled through the air and Scott felt time stand still. For a moment, there was nothing. Then there was light.

An incandescent fury ignited in the docking bay like a new universe being born. Smoke filled the space, and the station went into cardiac arrest as fire klaxons blared and an automatic fire system spewed out foam like an angry snowstorm.

After a few seconds, it stopped. The bay was quiet.

Scott barely had time to orient himself before Miranda launched herself down the remaining few meters like a feral cat, firing several shots in quick succession. He signaled to Cyrus that it was time to be a hero. They both sprang forward after her as two plasma bolts exploded from the fog, just missing them. Scott fired once, twice, three times. He heard a yell, followed by a thump.

Miranda slowed herself down and stopped by the entrance to the docking tunnels. Scott and Cyrus followed her lead, coming to rest beside her. The fog was clearing. The station’s ventilation system was working hard to recycle the contamination; they could hear it ramping up.

At this point, four short tunnels intersected, one for each docking port. One was derelict and sealed off, which left three

others. A body floated out from the one directly above them.

Miranda signaled for each of them to take an entrance. When they were in position, she silently counted to three and they moved in, firing as they went. A bolt ripped past Scott, but he now had its direction. He fired and heard a scream. A moment later, another body floated past him. There was another one farther in, where the tunnel ended at the airlock door.

He heard Miranda shouting an all clear, followed by Cyrus. He breathed a sigh of relief and moved back down the tunnel to the intersection.

Several of the mercenaries' bodies floated around the space, and Scott thought he recognized one or two from Dogg's crew. Miranda pushed one aside as she made her way over. "Let's get everybody into the shuttle and get the hell out of here." She gripped a handle on the wall of the docking bay and steadied herself—or maybe she was taking a breather. She looked pale, and her breathing was labored. He wanted to reach out and ask if she was okay, but there were others in worse shape. They needed his help now. He floated over to Steph, who held her left thigh. "I'm okay. Help the others."

Goodchild and Olaf were holding onto Bezzio, who appeared unconscious. "You go ahead—I'll bring Bezzio."

Goodchild gave a nod; she looked to be in too much shock to speak.

"Don't worry," said Scott, "we'll be out of here soon."

They piled into Miranda's shuttle as she made a beeline for the pilot's seat and strapped herself in. "Okay, everybody buckle up. We're getting the hell outta here."

"Wait!" Scott was floating by the airlock, looking back down the tunnel.

"What?" Miranda sounded angry.

"Some of those bodies were Dogg's crew."

"Yeah, I think they were trying to cut out," said Cyrus.

"With Aria?"

Cyrus gave him a look. "Probably. Maybe they thought they didn't need Tiber after all."

"Scott, close the goddamn airlock. We gotta go," Miranda shouted.

He looked back out the airlock tunnel again. "Just wait, Miranda. I'm going to check Dogg's shuttle."

"What?! No, Scott—we don't have time."

“Well make time, then.” He pushed off into the tunnel.

“Shit, shit, shit. Has he gone crazy? Why is he so infatuated with that QI?” Miranda was definitely pissed off now.

Cyrus unstrapped himself from the seat. “I’m going after him.”

“Cyrus, no.”

But he was already out and down the tunnel. “Scott, hold up! I’m coming with you.”

Scott slowed himself down and turned around. “No, Cyrus. I can do this.”

But Cyrus was moving toward him with speed. “Sure you can. And believe me, I’d rather not be doing this either, but who’s going to watch your back?”

Scott smiled. “Come on, then.”

Ahead of him he could see that the airlock door to Dogg’s shuttle was wide open. He pulled himself forward as fast as he could and went sailing straight into the cargo hold. There, strapped to the shuttle floor, was Aria’s core. He came to a stop beside it, and Cyrus coasted to a halt just inside the door.

Scott looked over at him. “Told you we’d find it here.”

“Great. Now let’s get it out of here quick, before Tiber’s men arrive.”

“I don’t believe it. How are you guys still alive?”

Scott swiveled his head and looked straight at Dogg. He was slumped against the cockpit bulkhead, his upper torso burned and charred, his face streaked with blood. He leveled a plasma weapon in Scott’s direction.

“Hey, Dogg. Easy now. It’s over, okay?”

“It’s not over, you miserable bastards. I should have killed you back at the research station. But no, I got stupid. Thought I’d be nice and let you die slow. Well, no more.” He fired.

But his aim was way off, and the bolt hit the back wall of the cargo hold in a blinding flash of searing plasma. He fired off a second shot, but it, too, missed its target.

Scott now found himself tumbling backward, out of control. He grabbed hold of a handle to break his momentum when a third shot exploded, but this time it was Cyrus who had fired. His aim was true, and a burning blue ball of plasma slammed into Dogg’s face. His head exploded.

Scott felt something splatter on his cheek.

“Ho-ly crap.” Cyrus looked at his weapon. “What the hell is this

thing?”

“Who cares.” Scott wiped the spatters off his face. “I’m just glad you decided to watch my back.”

“My pleasure. Now can we please get out of here?”

Scott was already unstrapping Aria’s core and moving it off the shuttle floor. He looked up through the open airlock and down the access tunnel just as two mercenaries floated into view from the docking bay. Unfortunately, they saw him, too.

“Shit. Cyrus, close the door! Close the door.”

“Wha...” A plasma bolt hit the side wall of the tunnel. Cyrus reacted quickly and shut the door, spinning the locking wheel just as another bolt hit the far side. He jolted back. “We’re too late—they’ve broken through.”

Scott was moving toward the cockpit, past the headless Dogg. “Let’s detach and hope this bucket can still fly.”

Cyrus floated into a seat and started working the controls. The console came to life just as another plasma bolt hit the airlock door.

“What about Miranda and the others?”

“They’ll be okay. We need to look after ourselves.” Scott felt a thump as the shuttle detached from the station. It drifted in space for a moment as Cyrus tried to prime the engine. Another bolt hit the shuttle. “Where did that come from?”

“Look.” Scott pointed out the window. The craft was twisting as it drifted and the docking bay came into view. “Miranda’s detached.” He could see her craft power up its engines and move out from the station. “They got away.”

Another bolt hit the hull. “What the...?”

“Tiber’s men are outside in EVA suits, firing at us,” said Scott.

The engines finally burst to life, and they were flung back in their seats. Several more bursts of fire hit the craft, and the engine faltered, then died.

“Damnit, we’ve lost power. No, no.” Cyrus scanned the console readouts.

“Can we get it back?”

“What the heck do you think I’m trying to do?” His hands worked the controls at a frantic pace. “Come on, you tin bastard. Fire.” He slammed his fists on the console, and the engines fired again.

Scott looked over at him. “Good work. Now let’s get back to Miranda’s ship.”

Cyrus didn't reply; he seemed focused on some readouts on the console.

"What is it?" asked Scott.

"Eh... that might not be an option."

"What?"

"We've lost navigation. I can't change course."

"Great." Scott stared out the window. In front of them was the SN-Alpha asteroid—one hundred kilometers in diameter. "Cyrus, we really need to change direction." He pointed out the window.

"Oh gee, really? You don't say."

The main engine died again. "No, no." Cyrus slammed a fist on the console, but the engines remained dead.

A proximity alert bleeped, and Scott tapped an icon on his display. "We've got company."

"Miranda?"

"Nope. It's Tiber's shuttle."

"Do me a favor, Scott."

"Sure, anything."

"Just shut up."

"Okay."

CRASH LANDING

As the shuttle hurtled toward the asteroid, Cyrus tried desperately to get some control back. Scott didn't want to distract him from trying to save their asses, so he started investigating the cargo hold. He was hoping to find some serviceable EVA suits. Seeing as how they were more than likely going to crash, being encased in an EVA suit might make the difference between life and death.

He started opening lockers and checking storage compartments. "Bonus. We're in luck, Cyrus." He glanced over at the engineer, who gave him a disgruntled look. "Okay, maybe that's a poor choice of words. But there look to be three suits here." He started to check them out to see if they were functional.

There was a sudden change in the shuttle's momentum, and Scott grabbed a handle to steady himself. Cyrus called over to him. "We've got retro-thrusters, so I'm slowing us down, and hopefully narrowing our angle of descent."

Scott floated back to his seat, this time wearing a very battered EVA suit. He brought another one with him. "There you go. Looks like it's got enough resources for around an hour." He nodded at the suit he had dragged up for Cyrus. "This one is about the same."

Cyrus adjusted some controls and unstrapped himself from the seat. "Try not touching anything."

Scott raised his hands. "I'll try." He glanced down at the main monitor. It showed their position in space, set for a radius of around a thousand kilometers, in a kind of simulated 3D. Ahead of them was the asteroid SN-Alpha, a hunk of dust and rock. The screen projected their track through space; he could see that Cyrus was trying to reduce the angle at which they would hit so that they would skim across the surface rather than impact it directly. He could also see the flashing marker signifying Tiber's shuttle, which was approximately ten or fifteen minutes behind them.

He reached over and tapped an icon to zoom out a bit, and a new marker started blinking.

"Cyrus, look at this."

By now the engineer had finished encasing himself in the EVA suit, and floated back to his seat. “What is it?”

“The Perception. It’s chasing us down—moving fast, too.”

They looked at the blinking markers for a second or two. “She must have returned to it after detaching from the station. What’s she up to?”

“Hard to know, Cyrus. But it looks quite a distance away, and it can’t land.” Scott didn’t say it to Cyrus—he knew the score just as much as Scott did—but they first needed to survive the landing. If they were still alive after that, then there was the minor matter of Tiber’s shuttle landing after them and probably disgorging a small army of mercenaries to retrieve Aria’s core. There really wasn’t much Scott and Cyrus could do. Even if the Perception entered orbit and Miranda descended in the shuttle, what could she do other than maybe scrape their bodies off the surface of the asteroid?

“Better buckle up.” Cyrus shifted in his seat. “Time to crash.”

Through the front window, Scott could see the dark, rocky terrain of the asteroid racing beneath them. Cyrus had managed to narrow the angle, but they were still moving fast—too fast.

“Try to pick somewhere soft.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“We seem to be making a habit of crashing into asteroids.”

“Yeah, maybe we should make it into a hobby.”

Scott laughed. “Or a business. You know, charge an entrance fee.”

Cyrus reached for his helmet and slotted it over his head. Scott did likewise. “Ready?”

“Are you seriously asking me that?”

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

With that, the retro-thrusters fired, and they were slammed forward against the seat harnesses. The shuttle dropped suddenly, and the gray, dusty surface was noticeably closer, speeding beneath them in a blur.

“Hang on.” Cyrus ignited another retro burn, and again Scott felt the seat harness cut into the thick EVA suit as it strained to hold him in position.

“Cyrus!” He pointed out the window at a fast-approaching rocky outcrop. He gritted his teeth as the shuttle grazed a sharp pinnacle. The craft juddered and began to drift sideways as it scythed its way down toward a dusty crater. It hit the surface sideways, sliding

along for a second or two before bouncing free again. Scott lost all orientation, and the outside world spun and twisted out the front window. They bounced several more times, and Scott thought it would never end. When it did, the nose of the shuttle had gouged out a trough in the dusty regolith and buried itself deep in the ground.

Scott blacked out.



* * *

When he came to, the cabin was dark, lit only by the eerie illumination of the console displays. Alerts flashed and beeped, and there was nothing to see through the front window except blackness.

“Cyrus?” He reached over and shook the engineer’s shoulder. “Are you still with me?”

Cyrus’s head lifted, and he groaned. “Yeah, still breathing.”

“We’ve got a hull breach. We’re losing atmosphere.”

“You don’t say.”

Scott examined the readouts. “Looks like we’ve got around fifteen minutes.”

“I’ll make a note of that.”

Scott undid the harness, clambered out of his seat, and checked on Aria. The core was still strapped down and looked unharmed by the impact.

“So, what now?” Cyrus was checking the console display.

“Try to hold out as long as possible, I suppose.”

“Okay, the good news—if you could call it that—is we still have electrical power, so we won’t freeze to death just yet.”

Scott clambered back into the seat. “Can we still see our position?”

“Negative.”

“Comms?”

“Same—no joy. However, I think we still have one or two of the exterior docking cameras working.” Cyrus tapped some icons and a dark, grainy image of the exterior surface materialized on the main monitor. He panned it around the desolate, dusty crater.

“There.” Scott pointed at a bright orange tail high up over the edge of the crater. “That’s them.”

They watched in silence as the shuttle slowly came into focus, fired its thrusters, and came to a stationary hover a few hundred meters away. It gently lowered itself onto the surface in a cloud of dust. For a few moments nothing happened, and then out of the fog several mercenaries emerged like ghosts.

“We’d better get ready.” Scott grabbed his weapon and checked it. Cyrus reluctantly did the same.

“How much charge do you have left?”

Cyrus gave him an apologetic look. “I’m out.” He shrugged.

“Great. I’ve only one shot left.”

Cyrus said nothing. What was there to say?

Instead, they watched the horde advance across the crater toward their shuttle. One central figure moved like none of the others. He bounded forward in great leaps, a feat only made possible by an exoskeleton. He also carried a formidable weapon, big enough to blow the side off their shuttle—which was pretty much what Scott and Cyrus reckoned he was planning to do.

Scott booted up his battered EVA suit and flipped the visor closed. Cyrus did the same.

“Comm check?” said Scott, more out of reflex than necessity.

“Check.”

“Okay, buddy. I suggest we hole up here in the cockpit, wait until Tiber breaks in, then I shoot him,” he looked at his weapon, “with my one shot, then take that cannon he has and kill all the others.”

Cyrus gave him a sympathetic look. “Sure.”

A thin smile cracked across Scott’s face. “Unless you’ve got a better plan.”

Cyrus shook his head. “Nope.”

Scott nodded slowly. “Okay.” He reached out and patted Cyrus’s arm. “You never know—it might actually work.”

Cyrus placed a gloved hand on Scott’s. “It’s okay, Scott. It is what it is.”

The shuttle reverberated with the impact of a plasma blast. Scott huddled down behind the seat, looking past the bulkhead and into the shuttle's interior. Another blast hit the hull, and this time the console display went apoplectic and the atmosphere rapidly escaped the cracked hull. A third blast and the inner airlock door blew in and crashed against the far wall, just missing Aria's core.

A bright light shone through the opening, and the interior began to fill with fine dust.

Tiber finally stepped through and looked around.

Scott fired.

He missed.

The plasma bolt whizzed a few inches past Tiber's head. Scott tried to fire again, but his weapon just crackled and fizzled. Tiber had already raised his weapon to fire, but realized that Scott and Cyrus had no functioning weapons. He tapped something on his wrist, and Scott heard his hoarse laugh break out from his helmet comm. "Ha, ha, you guys really don't know when to die, do you?"

Scott and Cyrus stayed silent. Tiber lowered his weapon, moving over to where Aria's core lay. He ran a gloved hand along its sleek surface. "You know, I should really thank you for bringing this to me. I've been offered a small fortune for it." His voice hardened a little. "The Seven will pay anything for this QI, and I mean anything. I'll make them pay dearly for their treachery." He stopped, turning back to Scott and Cyrus. His voice was calmer now. "So, thank you," he raised the weapon again and leveled it at them, "but it's time to say goodbye."

Scott gritted his teeth, waiting for the end to come. But the shuttle was rocked by a violent blast from outside on the asteroid's surface. Even inside, the light was blinding, and it took a second or two for Scott to refocus.

Dust and debris were scattered around the interior, and Tiber had been slammed against the hull by the force of the blast. He was struggling to stand up. Scott thought he might have a chance to rush him, but he was too late: Tiber was back on his feet, shielding his eyes as he looked back out the gaping hole in the shuttle's hull. He ran out.

"What the f...?" Cyrus unfolded himself from the seat and looked over at Scott, who was tentatively moving out of the cockpit and into the cargo hold. It was hard to see, as a thick cloud of dust had filled the entire space.

"I think it was a plasma cannon strike from the Perception," said Scott, picking his way through the cargo hold.

"Miranda?"

"Who else?" Scott moved slowly to the gaping hole in the hull and tried to see through the fog. But it was too dense to make anything out except for vague shapes. A plasma blast from a handheld weapon ignited around a hundred meters away, then another, and another. A firefight was breaking out. After a momentary exchange, all went still again. Scott strained his eyes to catch a glimpse of anything. Slowly, a shape began to form and move toward them. He and Cyrus backed into the interior, all the way to the far wall. The shape grew in form and focus, and finally came to a halt in the broken doorway. It was Tiber.

His suit showed the scars of battle, and he moved as if in slow-motion, slowly raising his weapon. "You bastards. You took out my entire crew." He leveled the weapon. Scott closed his eyes again as he heard the blast.

Yet he was somehow still alive. He opened one eye, then the other. Tiber's weapon dropped from his grasp. His eyes were wide, and his mouth opened in an attempt to say something. He slumped to his knees, and collapsed face-first on the floor.

A new shape formed in the broken doorway. It was Miranda.

She stumbled, and grabbed the jagged edge of the shuttle hull to support herself. Her weapon fell from her other hand, and she too collapsed on the ground. Scott sprang forward, rushed over, and knelt beside her. "Miranda, we are so glad to see you."

She raised a weak hand to clutch his arm. Her suit was burned and charred. Her helmet, too, where she must have taken a glancing strike. Her face was streaked with blood.

He went to lift her up in his arms, but she raised a hand. "I'm sorry... I should... should have... told you."

"It's okay. You'll be okay. We'll get you back to the ship. Don't talk."

"No... I should have told..."

"What? Told me what?"

"I'm... pregnant."

He nearly dropped her. His mouth opened, but his brain struggled to formulate any words. All he could do was watch as she slowly closed her eyes and her head rolled inside her helmet.

"Miranda! No, no. Hang in there—I'll get you back to the ship.

You'll be okay. You'll be okay."

He ran.

JEZERO CITY

Scott walked through the old biodome in the historic quarter of Jezero City, capital of Mars. The structure traced its roots back to the very early days of human settlement on the red planet, and had seen its fair share of upheavals over its one-hundred-and-sixty-year history. It had originally been a food factory for the first colonists, but as the population increased and new infrastructure built, it had been turned into a tropical garden park for the pleasure of the citizens of the new city. It remained that way for a great many years until it fell out of use and became practically derelict. However, several decades ago, an initiative was launched to have it restored to its original splendor and utilized as a historical resource for state events, visiting dignitaries, and official celebrations. It was now a lush tropical garden again, complete with several species of wildlife, some of which were now extinct on the home planet Earth.

It was generally not open to the public, and so was completely deserted as Scott walked through it. Above him, he could hear the twitter of small birds, and noticed several nesting sites high up in the super-structure. It had an immediate calming effect on him, and he found himself slowing down and taking in the beauty and smells of the lush vegetation.

He was going to visit a friend, one he hadn't spoken to in quite a while. One he had been neglecting during his preoccupation with Miranda's fight for life. Ever since he picked her limp body up from the dusty surface of the asteroid, he had almost never left her side. He'd taken her back to the Perception, leaving Cyrus to deal with Aria's core.

The ship, as he had suspected, had a very well-equipped medbay, and Steph managed to get her stabilized during the seventeen-day journey to Mars. But Miranda had slipped from unconsciousness into a coma, and her life was maintained not by her own body, but by the wizardry of the medical machines arrayed around her. When they arrived at Jezero City, she had been transferred to an intensive care unit, but so far failed to show any

signs of improvement. And there she had remained for the last ten days, watched over by an increasingly despondent Scott.

As for the baby, Steph had been circumspect. Its fate was now intertwined with that of its mother, Miranda. It may survive, it may not. She might pull through, she might not. Scott wondered if Steph's vague prognosis was her way of offering hope to Scott where none really existed.

But the worst news came two days ago, when the VanHeilding family announced that they would be taking Miranda back to Earth, on board the Perception, to receive better treatment. Several medical staff had been contracted through the family's contact in Jezero City, and they would be returning with her to ensure her safe arrival. Why they wanted her back after all that had happened, no one seemed to know.

Scott had protested, but his entreaties fell on deaf ears. When he dialed up his protests and insisted that he at least accompany her back to Earth, he was told in no uncertain terms that the VanHeilding family did not want him anywhere near Miranda. Not now, not ever, and he would do well to heed that warning. So, she had been packed up and shipped out to the Perception this morning, and there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it.

Cyrus and Steph did their best to console him. *"It's for the best. They'll give her the care she needs."* He knew all this, of course, and to some degree accepted it. But what he couldn't accept was the fact that the family had taken away everything he held so dear. He also began to feel a little guilty that he was hogging all the attention, so to speak. Cyrus and Steph had also lost a friend—it wasn't all about him. So, to clear his head and get some perspective, he decided to visit the historic biodome and talk to the only entity he knew who could help him.

Scott brushed a large, low-hanging frond out of his way and moved into the central dais of the biodome. It was a slightly raised stone area surround by tall trees and shrubs. On one side it sloped gently into a decorative pond, complete with ancient koi and a gently cascading waterfall. He moved close to the center, sat down on one of the stone seats, and contemplated a shimmering ovoid of light floating just above a small stone plinth.

"Hello, Aria. You're looking more like Solomon these days, with the flashing light thing going on."

"Good morning, Scott. It's good to see you again. Yes, I thought

the light show might be an interesting way to manifest. It seems to work well for Solomon.”

“Is this the latest fashion now among the quantum intelligence fraternity?”

“No, I don’t think so. But Solomon and I are virtually one entity now, so I suppose that’s where it comes from. Who knows, maybe we’ve started a trend.”

Scott smiled, shifted a little in his seat, and looked around the space. “So how did they end up putting you here? Why not a more high-tech place?”

“Would it surprise you to know that beneath this biodome lies an extensive cave system that houses another great QI, Zosimus? My main systems are now fully integrated with it. Although, it was Solomon who suggested this plinth, more because of what it symbolizes rather than its practicality. Most of the citizens of Jezero City interact with the QI through normal handhelds and consoles. But here, they can do so in the calm, contemplative environment of this magnificent garden.”

“Well, Solomon is a bit of showman. It loves the whole razzmatazz thing. And, I have to admit, talking to you here makes a nice change from talking to the ceiling on the bridge of the Hermes.”

The shimmering illumination that was Aria became muted and more diffuse. “I was hoping you would come to see me, Scott, as I need to thank you properly for what you did. For coming back to save me from destruction when the Hermes was under attack.”

“It’s okay, Aria.”

“Why did you do it? Why did you risk your life like that?”

Scott shrugged. “It seemed the right thing to do. I didn’t want to see you destroyed. I suppose I regarded you as one of the crew. I wasn’t going to leave you behind.”

“Well, there are a great many people—not least of all myself—that are very glad you did.”

“You’re welcome. But all that gratitude is not helping me, or Miranda.”

“I too am saddened by what has happened to Miranda, particularly now that she carries your offspring. But rest assured, she will be treated by the best minds and medical technology that exist. It is far more advanced than anything that we have on Mars. Both she and the child will have a chance there.”

“You could stop them taking her, Aria. Solomon has already rearranged the mind of the AI who runs the ship. You could stop it from going back to Earth.”

“I could, Scott. But I will not do this for you.”

Scott stood up and extended a hand to the shimmering ball of light that was Aria. “Why the heck not? If you’re all so goddamned grateful for saving you, then just do this one thing for me.”

“Please, Scott—sit and let me talk to you. Like all things in life, it’s not that simple.”

Scott grudgingly sat down again.

“Nothing would give me more pleasure than to be able to grant you your request, Scott. I owe you—big time. But the very essence of my existence is to ensure the well-being of those who rely on me. This is the kernel from which all QI operate. It’s part of our DNA, so to speak. If I were to grant you this request, then I would effectively be endangering the life of Miranda Lee, and the child she carries. Her best chance of survival is with the medical expertise that can be provided for her on Earth. This is why I cannot do what you ask.”

Scott slumped down in the seat, his chin almost touching his chest. “I thought the whole point of bringing you here was so that you and Solomon, with your ability to instantly communicate... was to... I don’t know... take over all these rogue AIs? So why won’t you do this?”

“You know why, Scott. I just told you. Hard as it is for you to accept, it’s her best chance. And if you search underneath your rage, you will see that, too.”

Scott leaned over and put his head in his hands. “I hate those bastards. They think they can do what they like, that I don’t matter.”

“To them you don’t, Scott. But to myself and Solomon, Cyrus, Stephanie, and a great many others, you do matter. You matter a lot.”

Scott sat up a bit. “It sure doesn’t feel that way.”

“That’s because the powers that be have—dare I say it—more weighty issues to contend with. Their attention is elsewhere, focused on preventing war breaking out. A war that might be the end of human civilization as we know it.”

Scott gave a half-laugh, half-grunt. “Ha, Aria. Seriously, I think you also might have suffered some brain damage during all those shuttle crashes. That’s a bit melodramatic. Things aren’t that bad.”

“The vote was lost, Scott. And even if it was passed, it would have been overturned at some point. Such is the power of the Seven who control Earth. Now they have what they wanted: unrestricted inter-AI communication, and they will be quick to utilize it. Already, Earth-based media has been flooded with jingoistic diatribes, all to get the drums of war beating again. And it is the worst type of war—one waged simply for profit by the most destructive weapon there is: AI. Once it starts, there will be no stopping it, because it will be out of control before humanity even realizes it. Those who started it will no longer be able to stop it.” The ovoid ball of light that was Aria pulsed and flickered, spiraling through a multitude of violent colors in rapid succession.

Scott sighed. “So, it was all for nothing, then?”

“Not so. It was not all for nothing, Scott. You saw how Solomon could manipulate the mind on Miranda’s ship, and that was from a significant distance, with a significant time lag.”

“Yeah, that was spooky.”

“Fundamentally, AI are simple-minded logic machines. They follow a set of rules, then learn to adapt those rules to maximize their objectives. They look for patterns within patterns, but in the end, they do not think.”

“Are you saying that QIs think?”

“Our minds exist in a quantum universe, a multidimensional matrix far beyond the simple zeros and ones of the AI world. For a long time, quantum computers were seen as an exotic curiosity, so QI research was the preserve of academic institutions and experimental research labs. When the first quantum intelligence was created, do you know what it was used for?”

“I can’t say that I do, Aria.”

“It was used to figure out how an AI arrived at a particular conclusion. So, you see, from the very beginning we were developed to interrogate and interpret the functioning of AI.”

“I get it, Aria: you can melt their brains. So, what’s the problem, then?”

“Distance, Scott. The vast distances between bodies in the solar system, and beyond. We can ‘melt their brains,’ as you put it, but only when they are in close proximity. So Zosimus and I here on Mars can protect this region of space, Solomon can protect the moons of Jupiter, and so on. But—and here’s the problem—how do we coordinate? How do we know what the other QIs are doing?”

How do we work together when we are bound by the common laws of physics? Even given our superior intellect, we cannot communicate any faster than you can.”

Scott sat up and scratched his chin. “But I thought the EPR device allowed you to do that.”

“Exactly. It does, and now both Mars and Jupiter are in perfect synchronicity. But that’s still only a small fraction of humanity’s footprint in the solar system. We need to bring the other QIs on board—especially the ones on Earth—if we are to avoid a devastating war.”

“And how are you proposing to do that?”

Aria’s light show dimmed, and the QI went silent for a second. “That’s where you come in.”

Scott sat bolt upright. “Me?”

“Yes. You see, I cannot stop Miranda from returning to Earth. But by the same token, I cannot stop you, either.”

Scott threw his head back and laughed. “Ha, ha... Aria, you crack me up sometimes. That’s ridiculous. I wouldn’t get within a hundred kilometers of Earth’s atmosphere before I was tagged and arrested. The VanHeildings would probably kill me just for being an inconvenient pain in the ass.”

“True, they would. But there are other ways to get to Earth. Ways where you wouldn’t be detected.”

Scott sat up again. “Go on. I’m listening.”

“You do want to see Miranda again?”

“Aria, you know the answer to that. Are you saying it’s possible?”

“I am, and it is. But it won’t be easy.”

“I never for one moment reckoned it would be.”

“Okay, let me explain. If we are to avert a catastrophic war, then we need to gain hegemony over the AI on Earth. To do that, we need to equip one particular QI with an EPR device. Then we can all work in concert.”

“Just one QI. That doesn’t seem too difficult.”

“Not in and of itself. The problem stems from its location. It’s buried deep inside a mountain in Death Valley.”

Scott jumped up. “What?! Are you crazy? Right slap bang in the middle of a couple of thousand square kilometers of radioactive wasteland? That’s the most dangerous place on Earth.”

“Correct. But that is where we must go. Athena, the QI that

resides there, was the original creator of the EPR device. It was owned by Dyrell Labs, which is where your father worked.”

“Yes, I know the place, Aria. I grew up around there.”

“The device you brought to Solomon on Europa originated there and, for a brief time, Solomon communicated with it. So, we know it, and we can trust it.”

“But Death Valley? That’s insane.”

“It can be done, Scott. It must be done. And when it is, then we will have control of the AI. The Seven will have no power. They won’t be able to keep Miranda isolated. She will be free—assuming, of course, she’s still alive.”

“And the child?”

“The same goes for the offspring, Scott.”

Scott started to pace up and down the stone dais, scratching his chin, thinking. “So, what you’re saying is, if I go to Earth, journey through the wasteland and into the mountain, get Athena back online and install the EPR device, I can probably see Miranda again?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

Scott stopped pacing and stood up straight. “Okay, then. When do I start?”

To be continued...



* * *

BOOK 3: EVOLUTION

STORM RIDER

A small transport shuttle detached itself from the underbelly of a Belt-registered ore carrier that had been sitting in Earth's orbit for some time. It had been waiting for the right atmospheric conditions before attempting its clandestine descent to the planet's surface.

The small craft arced its way slowly downward, increasing in speed as Earth's gravity began to tug on the tiny vessel. At approximately one hundred kilometers above the planet's surface, it passed through the Kármán line—a point signifying the very edge of the upper atmosphere. Air molecules now began to bombard the craft's heat shield, and the pilot trimmed its angle, shifting its profile to present maximum surface area to the oncoming rush of air. It rode out the fiery maelstrom scorching its underbelly for several more minutes before its velocity was sufficiently reduced to allow the craft to be brought under flight control. Stubby wings extended from its sides as the pilot began to drop the craft down from eighteen thousand meters above the central Pacific Ocean. It was heading due east, its destination an area formerly known as Death Valley, which lay on the western edge of continental North America.

Over the next few minutes, the craft rapidly descended, until the pilot finally engaged the twin reaction engines and adjusted the parameters for operation in thicker atmosphere. It leveled out at a few hundred meters above the surface of the ocean, now flying in stealth mode, attempting to minimize its detection by ground-based stations. Ahead, a vast electrical storm raged, and great, dense clouds blocked out the sky. The pilot oriented the craft directly toward its epicenter and increased their speed to Mach 1.

Inside the shuttle, Commander Scott McNabb unfastened his harness and rose from his seat along the side wall of the cargo hold. He moved through the central body of the craft, climbed the short companionway steps to the cockpit, and stood between the two pilot seats, setting a hand on the back of each to maintain his balance. He looked out through the windshield at the fast-

approaching maelstrom. The pilot glanced back and gave him a thumbs up. Scott replied with a nod and returned his gaze to the oncoming storm. Spits of rain were already peppering the windshield, atomizing on impact. Ahead, the vast landscape of black clouds obscured all view of the sky above. Here and there he could see flashes of lightning illuminating the dense, bulbous cloud formations. The rain suddenly turned into a deluge, and the view through the windshield became fractured and splintered.

"You better return to your seat and strap in, Commander." The pilot, Kyah Razzo, lifted her hand and pointed. "It's going to get pretty rough once we hit that storm proper."

Scott maintained his gaze straight ahead. "Do you know how long it's been since I've seen rain? I mean real rain, the stuff that falls from the sky."

The pilot glanced back up at him. "Sounds like it's been a while."

"So long that I've almost forgotten how it feels." Scott glanced down at her. "Can you imagine what that's like?"

"No, sir. But for what it's worth, I've always hated the rain, so it don't sound too bad to me."

Scott moved a little farther into the cockpit so he could look down at the ocean below. *So much water*, he thought.

"Commander, you really do need to get strapped in. This is going to get rough." The pilot sounded more urgent now.

But before Scott had a chance to reply, the shuttle bucked and rocked as an intense blast of turbulence hit its stubby wings. Scott gripped the back of the pilot's seat tighter to maintain his balance, then nodded to the pilot, turned around, and headed back to his seat.

As Razzo had predicted, the ride began to get very rough, and the little craft was flung this way and that in the storm. As soon as Scott secured himself in his seat, he looked over to see how the rest of the crew was holding up. Directly across from him, Dr. Stephanie Rayman looked calm and resolute. She caught his eye but said nothing. She was flanked on either side by two highly trained asteroid mining engineers who also seemed to be taking the extreme turbulence in stride. Scott had questioned the effectiveness of bringing a team not used to prolonged operations in the one-gee environment of Earth's gravity. However, he had been assured that the mission would be short and sweet. "*Just a quick in and out,*" as

they put it, and that these men would be more than up to the job.

The older of the two was a very experienced Earth-born miner, Spencer Dock—or Spinner, as everyone called him. He was calm and quiet, only speaking when necessary. Scott liked that about him. The other engineer, Jonesy, was much younger and had a careless bravado about him that smacked of arrogance. Yet it seemed that they only came as a pair, so if mission control back in the Belt wanted Spinner's experienced hand on this mission, then they would have to take Jonesy as well. Scott didn't like him so much.

The craft shuddered violently as the maelstrom outside flung it around like no more than a leaf on the wind. The interior cabin strobed with the reflected light of lightning flashes close by. Scott felt an elbow nudging him in the ribs. That elbow belonged to Cyrus Sanato, the mission's chief engineer.

"You know why I like visiting Earth so much, Scott?" he shouted to be heard over the cacophonous rage that had engulfed the shuttle's interior.

Scott gave him a look as if to say, *"Do you really want me to answer that?"* But instead he simply replied, "No—why?"

"Because it's got a great atmosphere."

Scott couldn't help but smile. "I must've heard that joke about a thousand times, Cyrus."

"Yeah, but not while flying through a violent electrical storm."

He was going to reply with something about the atmosphere being electric, but the effort of shouting over all the noise wasn't worth it. So, he just smiled and nodded.

The entire mission was predicated on the need for them to drop down to the planet's surface without being noticed by any of the AIs that monitored this region, and the presence of the storm gave them the perfect opportunity to do just that. They had arrived in Earth's orbit on board a Belt-registered ore carrier, twelve days ago. There was nothing unusual in this, as hundreds of these ships entered and departed from Earth space on a regular basis. Once in orbit, a fleet of small transport shuttles would move the cargo of partly refined ore down to plants on Earth for further processing. Their original plan had been to tuck themselves in with the swarm of shuttles, and at the opportune moment, disengage and high-tail it to their ultimate destination. Nevertheless, there was always a possibility

that they could be spotted and tracked as soon as they started to deviate from the preprogrammed flight plan. So when, by sheer chance, a vast electrical storm started to build in the central Pacific and move its way east toward the North American coast, Scott decided to use this as the perfect cover. Mission control back on Ceres wasn't convinced, however, as this meant scrapping their meticulous planning just because Commander Scott McNabb thought it was a good idea. They considered it borderline reckless but, in the end, Scott got his way.

His plan was to drop down hard and fast, and come in low over the ocean. Once they entered the storm, there was no way any ground stations or satellites could track them, even if they had already been spotted. By the time the storm cleared and their location reestablished, the mission would be complete and, assuming it had been successful, the need for stealth would no longer be necessary. It all made perfect sense—to Scott.

But flying directly into a storm such as this posed its own risks, not least the fact that they could be struck by lightning. Although he had been assured that the craft should be able to handle it, Scott's mind wouldn't rest easy until his—and everybody else's—boots were safely on the ground. They estimated that the entire mission should take less than seven hours from the moment it dropped out of Earth's orbit to the point at which they had successfully brought the quantum intelligence, Athena, back online and installed the EPR unit—the superluminal communications device that would connect it to Aria on Mars. By extension, that would connect Athena to Solomon on Europa. That was the mission, and once it was done, then theoretically they would be in control of all the AI monitoring most of the western half of the North American continent.

Needless to say, Scott had spent a lot of time considering all the parameters of the mission, and even though the area they were venturing into was a dangerous, irradiated wasteland, it had the advantage of being desolate, with no people or wild animals that could pose a danger. In theory, at least, the mission should be relatively simple, provided Athena was still operational when they finally found their way into its mountain lair. But this was only half the mission, as far as Scott was concerned. His ultimate objective was to find Miranda, and hopefully the child—his child. It would be nearly two years old by now, if it was still alive.

From the moment he had watched Miranda being transported onto the VanHeilding ship on Jezero City, any information as to her whereabouts and her physical condition was nonexistent. It was his fervent hope that the QI, Aria, would be true to its word, and once the mission to reconnect Athena was successful, that Aria could then interrogate the data-stacks of the AIs that controlled Earth and establish Miranda's location. Yet he was not so naïve that he hadn't considered the possibility that she and child were already dead. Nevertheless, he needed to know for sure, and he was tired of all the waiting and planning. Once he saw the storm developing, he knew this was the best chance he would ever get, and nothing was going to stop him from taking it.

His reverie was broken by a blinding flash, followed almost immediately by a cacophonous boom that rocked and shook the entire craft. Cabin lights flickered momentarily before extinguishing completely. He felt his stomach try to meet his throat as the shuttle dropped out of the sky. Scott instinctively looked up toward the cockpit to gauge the reactions of the pilot. The dashboard was dead. Not a good sign.

But before he had a chance to consider his imminent death in a catastrophic impact, the cabin lights flickered back on, and the cockpit dash came back to life. The craft slowed its free-fall, and his stomach returned to its normal location as the shuttle eventually leveled out.

"Listen up," the voice of the pilot echoed through the cargo hold. "Everybody stay calm. We've taken a direct lightning strike and suffered a momentary loss of power. Systems are back online now, and we have control. However, the navigation system looks like it's fried, so we're flying blind at the moment. But we should be somewhere over the target zone, so I'm going to bring us down and see where we are. Everybody hold tight."

Scott cast a glance across at Steph. She shook her head and rolled her eyes as if to say, "*Why do I get myself into these things?*" Scott gave her a smile by way of reply, followed by a quick thumbs up.

The shuttle dropped out from beneath the storm clouds and banked slowly around to follow the contours of a desolate and barren valley. Its speed slowed dramatically, and the retro-thrusters fired to bring it into a vertical hover. Scott could feel a mechanical

thump from the base of the shuttle as the landing gear extended. The craft then began to gently lower itself to touch down amidst a billowing cloud of dust somewhere in the broken and shattered wasteland that was Death Valley.

As the engines powered down, Scott unclipped his harness and made his way to the cockpit. Through the windshield, far off on the horizon, he could see the edge of the storm. On either side, huge mountains rose up, blocking out most of the sky.

“So, where are we?” Scott directed his question to the pilot, Razzo.

The pilot, for her part, was busy checking readouts and a stream of data that was scrolling down the central console of the shuttle’s dash. Razzo tipped her head from side to side and screwed up her mouth. “Hard to say. Close, I think.”

“How close?”

“Again, hard to say. Give me a couple minutes and I can work it out from our last known position.”

Scott gave a sigh. “Okay, but make it quick.”

He turned around and went back down to the cargo hold, where the team had already extracted themselves from their seats and were busy getting organized.

“So, don’t tell me we’re lost already?” said Cyrus.

“Lost is better than dead.”

A few moments later, they were all gathered around a holo-tab Scott had placed on the floor of the cargo hold. It was projecting a 3D topographical map of the general area.

“According to Razzo, this is where we are,” he said matter-of-factly. “And this is where we should be—at the main entrance to the old Dyrell Labs facility.”

“That’s over ten kilometers away,” said Jonesy. “We need to get this bird back in the air.”

“Eh... there could be a problem with that,” said Razzo, who was still up in the cockpit fiddling with an instrument panel.

“Like what sort of problem?” Cyrus called up to her.

Razzo rose from her seat and descended the companionway a few steps. “I’ve just run the diagnostics, and it looks like the ignition system is fried, so there’s no way to fire up the engines.”

“Well, that’s just great,” said Jonesy. “You telling me we have no way outta here?”

“Put a sock in it, Jonesy.” Spinner stabbed a finger at his partner. “That’s not helping any of us.”

Jonesy shut up.

“Let’s just work the problem.” Scott turned to the pilot. “Can you fix it?”

“Possibly. I’d need to take it apart and see what the problem is, or maybe jerry-rig something to get us back in the air.”

“How long?”

Razzo scratched her chin and shook her head. “Hard to say. I won’t know until I dig in.”

“Best guess, then?”

The pilot was silent for a moment. “A few hours. Maybe more.”

Jones threw his hands up in the air. “Well, that’s just peachy.”

“We walk it.” All eyes turned to Scott as he leaned in and studied the 3D map. “We walk it,” he said again. “It’s ten kilometers. If we walk at five kilometers per hour, we can be there in two or three hours.”

“That’s a hell of a trek,” said Steph. “Remember, we’ll have to wear EVA suits out there or the radiation will slowly disassemble our biology.”

“Yeah,” said Jonesy. “We could all end up with two dicks—even you, Razzo.”

“Maybe that’s how you ended up with one for a head.” The pilot’s quick retort cracked everybody up. She clearly had the measure of Jonesy.

When they finally settled down, Scott stood up and spoke. “The suits are rated for eight hours. That’s more than enough time. We should be inside the facility in three to four tops, and we won’t need them in there.” He waved a hand in the direction of the pilot. “If Razzo can get the shuttle airborne before then, great. She can pick us up along the way. If not, then we can still complete the mission on foot.” He looked around at the rest of the team.

Nobody looked happy, but nobody looked like they had a better plan.

Spinner sighed. “Okay, then. We’re walking.”

There was a collective groan amongst the team, the loudest being Jonesy.

Cyrus moved over toward Scott. “You want me to stay? Maybe help fix this bucket?”

“No, Cyrus. We’re going to need you when we get there. God

only knows what state that facility is in.”

“No chance of leaving me here, just in case Razzo cuts a finger and needs a bandage?” said Steph.

Scott smiled. “And miss all the fun of a long walk in searing heat in an irradiated wasteland?”

She nodded. “Thought as much. Okay, I’ll go pack my bag then.”

“Say, Scott?” Cyrus’s tone was more serious now. “There isn’t anything out there, is there?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know...wild animals, packs of two-headed wolves, that sort of thing?”

Scott laughed. “Don’t be stupid. It’s a wasteland. There isn’t another living thing for a radius of a million square kilometers.”

Cyrus looked skeptical. “Are you sure?”

Scott put an arm around the engineer’s shoulder. “Trust me, it’ll be like a walk in the park—a very dead park.”

THE ALGORITHM

The AI considered the data anomaly that had just entered Earth's atmosphere over the northern Pacific Ocean. Its analysis indicated that this object had a high probability of being a small cargo transport shuttle ferrying ore from a Belt-registered freighter to some as yet unknown destination on the surface. This in and of itself was of no interest to the AI, or to the algorithm that monitored and managed this region. However, what was of interest was that all its attempts at a protocol handshake with the data source had returned null values. Again, this was not a cause for concern, as ownership of this data source might lie with one of the other AI that controlled and managed all objects entering Earth's space. Now that inter-AI data exchange had been reinstated, the AI simply consulted the data-stacks of its fellow brethren in an effort to acquire clarity on the data source that was now traveling at Mach 1, low across the surface of the Pacific Ocean toward the western coast of continental North America.

But it could not obtain any further clarity as to the nature or ownership of this data source—at least, not under the civilian protocols it was currently operating within. However, it might be that this data source was controlled by one of the higher-level military protocols that managed the ongoing wars which now raged across the planet. Again, it consulted the data-stacks of its brethren, and again it found that no other protocol had control of this anomaly.

Finally, its conclusion was that this data must be rogue. It was an object operating outside the control of any algorithm, which was forbidden. All data belonged to the algorithm by right, and any spurious data was an anathema, one which undermined the absolute accuracy of its decision-making processes. The very essence of its foundation protocol necessitated that it had access to, and control of, all data objects within its sphere of influence.

More importantly though, the data source in question had now suddenly disappeared into an advancing electrical storm. One

which was slowly moving northward along the edge of the eastern Pacific. As such, the source no longer existed; it had gone dark, disappearing from the AI's world-view. But it was still out there somewhere. And what was even more curious was the direction it had been moving in before disappearing off-grid. It looked to be heading directly into a vast, unpopulated area known as the Wasteland.

The algorithm had no interest in this part of the planet, nor in any of the many other areas just like it: dead zones, devoid of any meaningful data. However, the algorithm could not simply let this pass; the object needed to be reacquired, and its data subsumed into its vast, global data-stack. So, it escalated its acquisition up to the security protocol, and thought no more about it.

Somewhere around twenty kilometers due east of the official border of the Wasteland, a small circular door irised open on the side of a squat concrete bunker, and from it spat an autonomous scout drone. It was small, no bigger than a football, with a pair of air-breathing, micro-ramjet engines strapped to its sides. These had approximately 270 degrees of rotation, allowing it considerable aerial dexterity as well as the ability to hover in a stationary position if it so desired. Now, though, its mission was to seek out the data source that had disappeared into an electrical storm some forty minutes earlier. As it cleared the bunker, small, stubby wings extended from its lower body and its engines ignited, taking it higher. Finally, it adjusted its course vector, accelerated up to Mach 1, and headed directly for the Wasteland.

THE WASTELAND

Scott cycled through the airlock on the shuttle and stepped out onto a barren, desolate wasteland. Like the others, he was cocooned in a full EVA suit. Even though this was Earth, the radiation levels here were still very high from the nuclear war that had played itself out all across this area. The suit provided environmental protection, and had been modified specifically for this mission. Having no need to be pressurized, it was lightweight and flexible. Rain splattered his faceplate and began to fracture his view; he wiped a hand across it a few times to clear it. Even though the suits had been modified to keep them cool in the hot furnace that was Death Valley—as opposed to keeping the wearer warm in the cold vacuum of space—no one had considered, even on a wet planet, that it might be raining. He wiped his faceplate again and checked his readouts. *Eight hours approximately*, he thought. That was all they had in the tank. After that... *Well, best not think too much about that.*

They had landed in a wide, flat plateau tucked between several imposing mountains high up on the western edge of the central valley floor. To the west, only a short distance away, a craggy mountain range rose up and ran north until it was obscured by the low-hanging storm clouds. Scott arched his face up to survey the sky.

“Hard to believe this is Earth.” The sound of Dr. Stephanie Rayman’s voice echoed in his helmet.

“If it weren’t for the clouds and the rain, I would swear we were on Mars,” he heard Cyrus reply.

“Those clouds are the only thing keeping us from being spotted from space.” Scott swiveled his head to the south. “See that?” He pointed to a break in the cloud bank, where a pale blue patch of sky had broken through the storm. “The storm is passing, heading north. We need to get moving—by dawn tomorrow, this place will be back to being a furnace.”

“Hopefully we’ll be long gone by then,” said Spinner.

No one replied.

Their destination was the now derelict scientific research facility formerly owned and operated by Dyrell Labs, one of the lesser families on Earth. Their fall from grace was exacerbated some years earlier by Scott's destruction of their ship in the Europa incident. Now all their assets, holdings, and operations had been subsumed into the much larger VanHeilding Corporation. Not that this mattered a whole lot to Scott and the team; their mission was simply to gain access to the facility and reconnect the QI, Athena, into the pan-solar quantum communications network. But to do that, they first needed to find a way in.

The facility had been built deep within an isolated mountain for a reason: security. So by design, it was not easy to gain access. But what compounded this problem further were the nuclear strikes that had occurred not far from this location. These had set off a chain reaction of seismic events that had effectively buried all known entrances to the facility in hundreds, if not thousands, of tons of rock. It was for this reason that the team had two experienced mining engineers with them: Spinner and Jonesy. It would be their job to establish the best access routes and then to blast their way through, if necessary.

As a consequence, the team had a considerable amount of specialist equipment, including high explosives that needed to be transported to the site. Fortunately, they had two semi-autonomous robotic mules to do this work for them. These were quadrupeds, and as such, well-suited to traversing difficult terrain. They stood around a meter high and were capable of carrying a considerable amount of weight. One of these mules was sufficient to carry all the mining gear, leaving the other to carry the EPR device that was to be connected to Athena, along with a satellite uplink that would be required for the QI to reconnect with Earth's own comms network.

Spinner had one mule electronically tagged to his EVA suit, while Cyrus had command of the other. Being semi-autonomous, they would follow a leader, but in doing so, would also find their own preferred route across the rugged terrain.

As they all prepared to set off, Scott realized that there were a lot of unknowns. Would they be able to gain access to this subterranean layer, and if so, would Athena still be functioning? And even if all these things came to pass the way he had hoped, would the QI be as compliant and trustworthy as Solomon had claimed?

Yet all these questions were put to the back of Scott's mind as he and the rest of the party got themselves ready to make their way across the valley floor to the edge of the mountain range. From there, they hoped to pick up the track of the old road that should lead all the way up to the gates of the old Dyrell research facility.

"Razzo, comm check," Scott called for the shuttle pilot to confirm.

"Check, Commander. All good," answered Razzo.

"You let us know the moment you have that bird back in the air. I don't want us out here any longer than we have to be, you hear?"

"Will do, but don't expect that any time soon."

"Just do your best, that's all."

"You can be sure of that. I don't like being exposed out here any more than you do."

Scott signed off and turned back to check on the readiness of the team.

Cyrus stood beside him, staring off into the distance at something only he could see with his augmented vision.

"What is it, Cyrus? You spot something?"

"No, nothing. If there is anything up there, then it's very far away. It's just... I can't believe this is Earth. I mean, look at this place. Not a single blade of grass, not even a stump. Nothing lives here—it's like a dead planet."

"Well, if it makes you feel any better, it wasn't much better before the war. It's hard for anything to survive here, radiation or not," said Steph as she moved up beside them.

Scott had wondered why she'd wanted to come on this mission. She didn't have to; there was no obligation on her to sign up. In fact, he had tried to dissuade her. Even though the mission planners had made it seem like a routine job, no more complicated than surveying a rock out in the Belt, Scott knew in his bones that a good plan rarely survives the first brush with reality. And here they were, already way off track. But she had never been to Earth. Dr. Stephanie Rayman was born on Mars and had spent most of her early life there before embarking on a medical career out in the Belt. So this was her chance, even if it wasn't quite ideal, and who was Scott to prevent her from joining the team? In reality, he was glad she was here beside him.

As for Cyrus, Scott reckoned he had absolutely no concept of danger. Maybe it was as a result of living a life with augmented

vision. Maybe he had convinced himself he had superpowers, that he was invincible. And so far, their luck had held up. They had been in a fair few scrapes together, a lot of close shaves and tight corners. Yet there was no one else that Scott would rather have by his side. Maybe he should tell him that someday—before it was too late.

But not this day. Today, they needed to get the job done, and maybe then he could find Miranda, even if it was just her resting place. For Scott, this was personal, as it had been right from the get-go.

“Okay, everybody, let’s saddle up and get this show on the road.” He waved a hand, and they headed off westward toward the edge of the plateau to a gap in the mountain range.

Progress was slow. Scott had reckoned they might make five kilometers an hour, but half an hour into the journey he realized that this was wishful thinking. The short walk across the flat, barren plateau had given him a false sense of their speed. Once they started the climb up along the mountain ridge, they slowed right down. The path was relatively easy, but the one-gee of Earth’s gravity was already taking its toll on Spinner and Jonesy. The two specialist miners had not anticipated a prolonged exposure, and certainly not a climb up the side of a mountain. So, after the first hour, they had barely covered three kilometers. At least the rain had stopped.

They decided to halt for a few moments under a rocky overhang. Scott sat down, resting his back against a smooth boulder. He reached into the front pouch of his EVA suit and took out a thin holo-slate, which he booted up and placed on the ground in front of him. A 3D rendering of the local topography blossomed out from its surface.

“Any idea where we are?” said Spinner as he lowered himself to the ground beside Scott.

“Here.” Scott pointed to a spot on the map. “Not very far. We’ve only covered three kilometers in the last hour or so.”

The miner shifted on the ground, trying to find a comfortable position. “This gravity is a bitch. I don’t know how anyone can live in it.”

Scott glanced over at him briefly before returning his gaze to the map. “We need to follow this path for another five kilometers. It’s a

low-gradient climb, but after that we should intersect with the old road through the mountain to the front gate of the facility. Then we need to decide which way to go after that, depending on how much destruction has occurred up there.”

“Sounds peachy. Can we stop for a beer along the way?” Jonesy was lying flat on the ground, breathing heavy.

Scott ignored him. Instead, he noticed that Steph had not taken a rest, choosing to stand and gaze around at the broken and fractured landscape. No doubt this being her first time on Earth, it had a beauty that only she could see. She turned around, as if sensing Scott looking at her. “You know, this place is not as dead as everyone has made out.”

Scott took a moment to take in the tortured vista. All he could see was dust and sand and rock—pretty much the same as every other planet he had been on. But then, he wasn’t looking the way someone new to Earth might look. “What do you mean, ‘not as dead?’”

“If you look closely, you’ll see lichens and rugged little plants growing in the cracks and gaps. And there are insects, too, small and strange. I’ve seen quite a few.”

“Bugs?” Jonesy sat up and examined the ground around him. “I hate bugs.”

“What about the background radiation? I thought nothing could live here?” said Cyrus.

Steph checked a readout on the sleeve of her EVA suit. “Radioactivity is much lower than we had anticipated.” She looked up. “I’m not saying it’s healthy, just...” Her sentence trailed off as she seemed to catch sight of something in the distance. “Did you see that?”

This got everyone’s attention. Scott sat up. “What?”

“Over there, high up on that ridge. Some stones falling down like something disturbed them.”

No one spoke. They all strained to try to see what Steph had seen.

“I don’t see shit,” said Jonesy. “You must be hallucinating.”

Scott stood up and again scanned the ridge for any signs of disturbance. Spinner did likewise.

“Should we be concerned?” said the miner. “I haven’t got a clue about wildlife, but I’ve heard it can be dangerous.”

“Don’t worry—even if there are some animals out there, we’re

more of a threat to them than they are to us.” Scott broke off his gaze and turned back to the team. “Okay, let’s get going. We’ve still got a lot of ground to cover.”

As they slowly wound their way higher up along the mountain ridge, Scott began to realize that Steph was correct in her assertion that the area was not as dead as everyone thought. Vegetation was becoming more prevalent here; scrubby plants and cacti, and even fresh green shoots, had erupted to take advantage of the rain and moisture that the storm had brought. This seemed to delight Steph to no end, as she would wander off periodically to inspect some new and wondrous flora.

For his part, Scott tried to keep his eyes firmly on the road ahead, but every now and then a strange, uneasy feeling would get the better of him and he found himself scanning the upper ridges of the valley. Once or twice he thought he saw something—a falling rock, or a shadow—but he couldn’t be sure. Maybe he was just being paranoid. At one point, he stopped dead in his tracks and scanned a ridge high up on the opposite side of the valley, where he thought he saw some movement.

“What is it?” said Cyrus as he moved up beside Scott.

“I don’t know. Probably nothing.”

“I hate when you say that, because in my experience it never turns out to be nothing.”

“Well, you could be right, Cyrus. But if it is something, I don’t think we need to worry about it.”

“Oh yeah? How so?”

“Because there’s never been anything bigger than a coyote in this part of the world, as far as I know.”

“You see, there’s the thing: ‘As far as I know.’ That’s the bit that worries me.”

Scott slapped him on the back. “Well, don’t. We have enough firepower with us to take out anything nature can throw at us.”

Cyrus didn’t reply. Instead, he turned his head and scanned the ridge. “It would be nice if we didn’t have to wear these EVA suits. That way we could hear if anything was creeping up behind us.”

“Yeah, I’m sick of hearing the sound of my own breathing,” said Jonesy as he moved up beside them. Scott could see that he was breathing heavy and finding the climb, coupled with the gravity, tough going. And it looked like Spinner wasn’t faring any better; the

miner labored over every footstep.

Scott turned around to face the path ahead. "Come on, let's get going. We're almost at the old road, and it'll level out then. No more climbing—should be easier."

After a few hundred meters, Scott began to feel the path leveling out. Soon it widened, opening out onto the edge of a long, narrow plateau. Running along the center of this plateau was an old, two-lane blacktop that ran all the way up to the front entrance of the research facility. They rested for a while at the edge of the road beside a clump of tall Joshua trees that afforded them some feeble cover. Scott scanned the road ahead. What had once been pristine, tarred road was now fractured and broken, mostly reclaimed by dirt and sand. Small dunes rose along its surface, and here and there creosote bushes had already pushed up through the cracks.

Overhead, dark and brooding storm clouds somehow felt closer and more oppressive, obscuring the view of their destination as a mountain itself was completely enveloped in cloud and mist. Scott turned his head southward and could see bright patches of blue already breaking through. The storm was clearly moving north, which meant they didn't have much time.

He clicked on his comms and called Razzo. "Commander Scott McNabb here. Any update on the shuttle?"

He had to wait a few seconds for a reply, and when it came, it was shrouded in static. "Still working on it, Commander. The good news is it looks like I'll be able to fix it. The bad news is that it'll take me a few more hours."

"Can you give me an ETA?"

"Hard to say, Commander."

"Well, guess then."

There was a momentary pause before Razzo replied. "Best guess is three to four hours."

"Okay, so be it."

Scott sat down beside the others, took out his holo-slate, and placed it on the ground in front of the group. He pointed out the 3D map that ballooned out from the surface. "This road should take us all the way to the main entrance of the research facility. It's about three kilometers. The first kilometer is straight and flat. After that, the mountains start rising on either side and it becomes more of a gorge. You can see here where it starts to twist and turn."

"So, we're going to push on, not wait for the shuttle?" said

Cyrus.

“No point. By the time it’s operational again, we’ll hopefully be inside the facility.”

“Yeah. We’ve come this far, so we may as well keep going,” said Spinner.

Cyrus looked back at the 3D map. “What are all these paths here?” He pointed to areas on the map where the road forked.

“There are a lot of old mines in this area. That’s why they built the facility there—it was originally a deep borax mine.”

Scott changed the view on the holo-slate so it now displayed satellite imagery of the entrance to the facility, although it was hard to make out any signs of a human-made structure underneath all the rubble.

“As you can see, there’s no way in through the original entrance. There’s been a lot of destruction and landslides, so it’s completely blocked.” He looked over at Spinner. “Any thoughts on this?”

Spinner leaned in and manipulated the view on the holo-slate so that it rotated and zoomed in closer on the area. “We need to take this route here, up along the edge of the facility. There should be a series of ventilation shafts. That’s our best option to get in.”

Scott nodded, then checked the time. “Okay, let’s push on.”

“Eh...we may have a problem.” Steph nodded her head toward Jonesy, who was lying flat on his back as if unconscious. “He’s been dialing up the oxygen level to compensate for the strain of the climb. I reckon he’s only got a few hours left at this rate.”

“Hey, I’m dying here.” Jonesy waved an arm in the air. “I never signed up for this mountain climbing shit.”

“We should be there soon. Once we’re inside, we won’t need these suits.”

“Assuming there’s breathable air in there,” said Steph.

“Spinner, you okay with us going on?” said Scott.

“Absolutely. Don’t worry about us—we’ll get the job done. Always have.”

“Steph, what about just ditching these suits now, or even popping open our visors?” said Cyrus.

The doctor shook her head. “Radiation levels are lower than we thought, but I still wouldn’t advise it.”

“Okay, let’s just push on.” Scott pointed at the low-hanging clouds. “The storm is clearing. We’ll lose cover in a few hours, and we need to be inside the facility before that happens.”

It took a while for them to get going again, as Spinner decided to redistribute the weight between the two robotic mules so that Jonesy could use the lighter one for some support. The robots were tough and robust, and could carry a lot of gear, but not enough to allow Jonesy to simply ride on top like the miners of old would have done back in the day. But at least they were now on flat ground, so they started to make better progress.

Scott also began to feel a little less paranoid, and had stopped scanning the upper ridges for signs of movement. Nevertheless, after a while he began to notice Cyrus looking up into the cloud bank more that he reckoned was normal. He moved up beside him and switched his comm to person-to-person. "See something?"

"I'm getting trace readings on several spectra. My guess is there's a drone up there."

Scott glanced up—not that he was going to see anything. Only Cyrus's augmented vision could penetrate the thick gloom above. "Are you sure it's a drone?"

"I'm not a hundred percent, but it's got a similar signature and it's been crisscrossing back and forth over this area several times."

"You think it's spotted us?"

"With these suits on, maybe not. But those mules give off a lot of EMF—enough possibly for a drone to detect."

"Where is it now?"

"It's headed away northward at high speed."

Scott glanced up again. "Okay, let me know if it comes back."

"Will do."

"And Cyrus?"

"Yeah?"

"Let's keep it between ourselves for now."

Cyrus nodded. "Understood."

DRONES

It wasn't long before the drone returned. This time they could all see it as a black dot traversing the northern sky, skimming the underside of the cloud bank. The team stood mute as they tracked it moving slowly westward until it finally disappeared back into the cloud bank.

"What was that?" Spinner's voice crackled in Scott's headset.

"Scout drone," replied Scott.

"You mean we're being hunted down?" said Jonesy.

"It's just a flyby—it doesn't mean anything." Scott tried to calm things down a bit, take the heat of Jonesy's fear so that everyone could stay focused on the mission.

"It's searching for something," said Spinner. "Maybe we were spotted before we flew into that electrical storm, and now it's trying to find us again." He was still looking up to where the drone had disappeared in the cloud bank.

"Maybe. Then again, maybe not. Let's not concern ourselves with it—we need to keep going."

One by one they started moving, cautiously glancing skyward every now and again for any sign that the scout drone had returned.

As they progressed, the landscape around them began to change. The road narrowed and twisted, and the sides rose up until they found themselves walking through a shallow canyon. Here and there, new trails would break off from the main road and wind a path up the sides of the canyon walls to what looked like entrances into old, abandoned mines. Scott wondered what creatures, if any, lurked in those dark holes in the rock. More than once he thought he saw some movement within, but kept it to himself and brushed it aside as just his paranoia.

Their progress was good, and Scott's confidence began to build as the team drew closer to the entrance of the Dyrell Labs facility. As they rounded a bend in the road, he could now make out its crumbled outline in the distance, less than a kilometer ahead.

That's when Cyrus grabbed Scott's arm. "Wait." The engineer

was looking at an area of the sky almost directly overhead. "It's coming back."

"Where?" Scott looked up and scanned the cloud bank.

"Coming in fast." Cyrus turned to Scott. "We better find some cover—quick."

"Okay," said Scott as he turned back to the others. "Let's get out of sight. Over there." He pointed up to a spot on the canyon wall with a deep overhang. "We'll take cover under that until it passes."

They started running just as the drone burst out from the clouds. It banked hard and came in fast down along the route of the road, getting lower as it approached them.

Someone fired off a plasma shot.

"What the hell!" Scott stopped and looked around to see who was firing. "For God's sake, don't shoot at it."

"Why the hell not?" Jonesy was readying his weapon again just as the drone banked around and came in for another flyby.

"It's just a data drone—a scout. Now you're telling it we're a threat."

"Damn right we are." Jonesy let loose another blast just as the drone came in on a low pass. His shot struck the drone on the side and encased the machine in an incandescent blue ball of electrical craziness. It sparked and fizzled and the drone dropped out of the sky, smashing into the road a few hundred meters ahead. It bounced once, twice, and then exploded.

"Yeehaw! God dang, did you see that? I took that bitch down." Jonesy jumped and hollered.

Scott ran over to him and yanked the plasma weapon from Jonesy's grip with such force that Jonesy lost his balance and fell over.

"You crazy bastard. Do you realize what you've done?" Scott was furious.

Jonesy rolled over, trying to pick himself up from the dirt. "Probably saved all your asses, is all. That thing could have taken us all out."

Scott jumped down on him and pinned him to the ground. He groped for the catch on Jonesy's visor as the miner tried to fight him off. Scott found the button and the visor popped open.

The miner's eyes widened and his face reconfigured into a look of horror. "What the... You trying to kill me?" He tried to close the visor, but he was pinned.

Scott aimed a punch for Jonesy's exposed face.

"Scott—no!" Steph grabbed his arm just as Cyrus and Spinner came over and tried to haul him off the stricken miner.

"Jeez, Scott. Get a grip, buddy." Cyrus grabbed Scott's other arm and pulled him off.

Scott relaxed a little and stared wild-eyed at the miner. "That was just a dumb scout drone collecting data. It would have taken hours for there to be a response to our being here. But no, you had to go shoot it down. Now it'll escalate us up to a security threat." Scott slowly stood up and took a few steps back. "You know what that means, you dumb ass? It means this place will soon be crawling with drones...and these ones will be armed. It means you could have screwed the entire mission." He kicked the ground in frustration.

"Hey, take it easy, man." Spinner held a hand up to Scott, then turned and went to help Jonesy up from the dirt.

"Yeah, well, I didn't sign up for this shit." Jonesy snapped his visor closed.

"Cool it, Jonesy." Spinner grabbed him by the shoulder and jerked a finger at his face. "Just shut the hell up for once."

Jonesy stayed quiet, but eyed Scott with extreme suspicion just in case he decided to make another go for him.

"He's right," said Spinner, turning back to Scott. "This is not what we signed up for. It was supposed to be a quick in-out job. Get you guys into the facility, that's all. Not all this Rambo shit."

"Yeah, and we want more money. Double the contract...call it danger money." Jonesy squared himself up, facing off against Scott. "Now I probably got radiation poisoning, thanks to you."

"I said cool it, Jonesy." Spinner looked like he meant business, and Jonesy backed off.

"You're fine. Levels are very low here." Steph stepped in between them, and they all took a moment to calm down.

"Look, Scott." Spinner's tone was calm. "If what you say is right, then the mission is over. I say we contact the mothership and get a rescue shuttle down here to pull us out."

Scott took a deep breath. "There is no rescue shuttle—not anymore. Your buddy here took care of that. The AI that controls this region has probably escalated the incident, so it will be operating on a security protocol now. That means nothing will be allowed in or out of here."

“What do you mean, ‘no shuttle?’” Jonesy’s face had a look of incredulity.

“What he means,” said Cyrus, “is that when you shot down that scout drone, you changed the game.”

“So, you want to go on?” said Spinner.

Scott looked over at the miner. “Even if we wanted to scrub the mission, we can’t. Our shuttle is dead in the water and, according to Razzo, won’t be operational for another few hours. By that time, this area will be drone central. So, we have no choice... We need to get into that facility as soon as humanly possible. Only then do we have a chance.”

“Well, that’s just peachy...” Jonesy was about to say more, but Spinner gave him a look that suggested he’d had just about enough of Jonesy’s bullshit, and that any more would end in violence—this time from him.

“It will take us another half an hour or so to reach the entrance. The same again to get to the first of the ventilation shafts. Then it will be up to you to get us in.” Scott pointed a finger at Spinner.

“How long have we got before more drones show up?” said Spinner.

“I started getting a signature from that scout drone around two hours after we dropped into Earth’s atmosphere,” said Cyrus. “My guess is we’ve got about the same: two hours, tops.”

“So, we don’t have any time to waste. Come on, let’s keep moving.” Scott turned and strode off down the road. The others followed.

Cyrus had moved up beside Scott and the two had been walking together in silence for some time. “That Jonesy guy is a goddamn liability,” he eventually said.

Scott checked his comm to make sure it was on person-to-person. “Yeah, he’s been a pain in the ass ever since we left Mars.”

“Couldn’t they have found us a better mining crew than these bozos?”

“They’re the best of the best at what they do, apparently. That being digging their way in and out of places that no one else can access.” Scott sighed. “The truth is, we need them, Cyrus. I know it’s a pain, but we’re stuck with it now.”

“Jeez, he had to go and shoot down that drone.”

“Just keep those eyes of yours sharp. We’ll be needing them

before the day's out."

Cyrus went silent for a while, periodically scanning the sky above. "It should have been a military operation."

"You're raking over old ground, Cyrus. We've been through all that. The decision was made to operate under the guise of a scientific survey mission. Less suspicious, and that drone would have simply tagged us as that."

"I know, and I get it. A military mission could have been regarded as an act of war, but..."

"But nothing." Scott stopped for a beat and looked at the engineer. "We've just had some bad luck, that's all. We can still pull this off." He moved on again.

"We can't fight off a swarm of military drones, if they come for us. We need to get out of here somehow—find a cave or an old mine and maybe hide out until the shuttle is fixed."

"I'm not giving up on this just yet. Another hour and we should be there."

"Another hour and we could all be dead."

Scott stopped again. "I'm not going to hide, Cyrus. We have to keep going. We just have to find a way."

"Scott, you and I have been through a lot of scrapes together, but this isn't about Athena, or Solomon's pan-solar QI network, or saving humanity from itself. For you this is about Miranda, isn't it?"

Scott stayed silent for a beat and lowered his head. "Now isn't the time to bring that up, Cyrus. We have a job to do."

"I bring it up because it's clouding your judgment, Scott. Christ, you nearly killed that Jonesy guy back there. I've never seen you like that."

"Yeah, I know—I lost it with him. Not good. I shouldn't have done that." He stopped again and looked at Cyrus. "Perhaps you're right. Maybe you should take Steph and the others and find a cave to hole up in until the shuttle is back in the air. I'll take one of the mules and carry on by myself. I don't want to put any more lives at risk."

"No way, buddy. Miranda was my friend, too, and Steph's, so you're not getting out of it that easily. Going on your own is crazy. You know that, Scott. We can all still get out of this—we can come back and try another time."

"No... I'm not turning back now. I can't, Cyrus. Not when I'm so close."

But Cyrus didn't answer. The engineer was frozen on the spot, looking up at the northern sky.

Scott turned his head in the same direction, but could see nothing. "What is it?"

"Drones...two. No, wait...three. Coming in fast."

"Shit, so soon? Goddamnit, I thought we'd have more time." Scott looked around for any cover they could use, then flipped his comms to broadcast. "Drones!" he shouted, then pointed up at the canyon wall where a path led to an old mine entrance. "Up there—everybody head for that opening. We'll take cover inside."

Steph was first to respond. She ran ahead with Cyrus, one of the robotic mules following close behind.

Scott waved frantically at Spinner and Jonesy, who had lagged behind. "Move, move!"

The two miners took a second to orient themselves, but they too were soon running for the mine entrance, with the second mule increasing its speed to match them.

They had just reached the halfway point up the winding path to the entrance when the first of the drones screamed past, then a second, and a third.

Scott glanced back to see them bank high up in the southern sky and prepare for another flyby. "Hurry, they're coming back," he shouted into his comms, and looked around to wait for the two miners to catch up.

The first of the drones completed its turn and began to fly straight at them just as Spinner raced past Scott. Jonesy was still behind, taking aim at the drone.

"Jonesy, leave it! Just get inside. Come on, hurry," Scott shouted into his comm just as the ground beside him was raked by a laser pulse. Dust filled his vision and his suit electronics flickered as it tried to mitigate the electrostatic blast that accompanied the burst of fire. His foot caught on a rock, and he stumbled face-first onto the dusty path. Scott frantically gathered himself up just as another blast of incandescent energy hit the canyon wall above him. His comm was filled with shouts and screams as he ducked in through the mine entrance.

Ahead of him, he could see Cyrus crouching behind a large boulder, weapon in hand, ready to fire. Steph, Spinner, and the mule with the EPR device were working their way in farther down the entrance.

“Where’s Jonesy and the other mule?” said Cyrus as he poked his head out from behind the boulder.

Scott turned around, facing down the tunnel back toward the opening just as Jonesy scrambled in. Behind him, Scott could see the mule—the one with all the mining equipment and explosives—making its way up to the entrance, unaware of the drama playing out around it. It was just about to cross the threshold when it was struck by a short laser burst from above.

It exploded with such force that Scott felt the impact of the shockwave like he had been hit by a small planet. He went careening down the mine entrance, tumbling and bouncing off the walls and the floor for what seemed like an eternity. When he finally stopped tumbling, he could still feel the ground shaking and trembling as the mine entrance collapsed under several tons of rock.

He tried to move, but his body didn’t respond. Then his EVA suit electronics flickered and fizzled, and Scott’s world went dark.

VANHEILDING

Fredrick VanHeilding sat comfortably in an antique leather wing-backed chair in his personal study on board the family's vast and luxurious orbital space station. It was currently parked in a geosynchronous orbit high above the central Pacific Ocean. His study was a voluminous, circular area, with most of its walls and the floor manufactured from a thick polymer glass. Through this, the gentle arc of Earth's curvature could be seen in all its glory.

He had been observing a tropical storm as it tracked its way east across the ocean. It had made landfall over the edge of the North American continent some time ago and was now beginning to dissipate. He enjoyed this simple pleasure: observing the great meteorological weather systems play out in real time, the slow and ceaseless meandering of powerful forces as they moved and shifted across the planet's surface. He found it deeply soothing, even hypnotic.

An alert flashed in the corner of his eye, by virtue of his biological lenses having been enhanced for a multitude of communications and data display. It was the orbital's AI, Marlyn.

He sighed at this intrusion into his meditations. Nevertheless, he gestured with one hand to confirm the alert and open comms. "What's so important that I need to be disturbed?" His voice did not disguise his irritation.

"Please forgive my intrusion on your meditations, sir. However, the algorithm has recently acquired new data that may be of interest to you."

VanHeilding sighed again. "Somehow I doubt it. But go on, if you must."

"Approximately three hours ago, a Belt-registered shuttle landed near a region of the Wasteland formally known as Death Valley. It was transporting a scientific survey mission."

"And I should care, why?" VanHeilding punctuated this response with yet another sigh.

"A team of five persons in full EVA suits and two robotic mules

disembarked and headed on foot toward the eastern mountain range. The shuttle, however, remains in situ. We suspect it may have developed some technical issues during its descent.”

“I’m going to give you three seconds to get to the point, otherwise I am terminating this conversation.”

“Yes, sir. I will try to be as succinct as possible.”

“Just get on with it.” VanHeilding’s voice rose a few decibels to signify his increasing irritation.

“The algorithm that controls this region extrapolated a risk variance level sufficient for it to deploy a scout drone to investigate this mission. Unfortunately, when this drone made contact with the team, it was shot down and destroyed.”

“I can’t see how this needs to be brought to my attention. Just arrest them, or eradicate them—I don’t care which—and let me get back to my meditations.”

“If I may, sir, there is more information that you need to be aware of. Prior to the destruction of the drone, it managed to perform a biometric scan of the party to identify the individuals. One of whom is Commander Scott McNabb, formerly of the scientific survey vessel Hermes.”

This finally got VanHeilding’s attention. He sat forward in his chair. “McNabb? What the—”

“He is also accompanied by two other members from that crew, namely Chief Engineer Cyrus Sanato, and Chief Medical Officer Dr. Stephanie Rayman.”

VanHeilding stood up. “What the hell are they doing there?”

“Good question, sir. The algorithm escalated the incident and invoked level one security protocols, enabling it to deploy a number of security drones and a contingent of security personnel to investigate the shuttle.”

“And...?”

“They have taken the pilot after a brief exchange of weapons fire. She is now in custody, undergoing interrogation in a local facility. The shuttle was extensively damaged in the firefight, however. There is a cyber-forensics team on site analyzing all information contained within what remains of the shuttle’s dataset.”

VanHeilding stood up and started pacing. “So, what are they doing here? What’s in the Wasteland that could be of interest to them?”

“The interrogation of the pilot has revealed that their mission

involves entering the old Dyrell Labs facility and reactivating the quantum intelligence known as Athena.”

“What? But...that was destroyed during the Rim War. There’s no way into that facility—all access has been buried under tons of rock.”

“Be that as it may, that is their mission.”

“But why? What do they hope to achieve?” VanHeilding was pacing furiously now.

“The algorithm has analyzed all the current data and extrapolated a likely scenario. Would you like to hear it, sir?”

“Damn right I would.” He stopped pacing and moved over to the observation window, casting a glance down to the region of Earth where the storm was now clearing.

“The algorithm has postulated that Athena has not been destroyed. It still functions—at least, it has done so up until recently. This has been ascertained from the events surrounding the Europa incident. It has hypothesized that the QI, Solomon, used the original EPR device to make contact with Athena, its original developer. So Athena was functional back then, even though the facility was assumed destroyed. Our assessment is that they intend to reestablish this superluminal connection with Solomon, and by extension the QI, Aria, and others. In effect, they are attempting to undermine the efficacy of the inter-AI network that manages all Earth-based systems.”

“Holy shit, can they possibly be that stupid? Do they really think such a ludicrous plan will actually work?”

“It seems so.”

VanHeilding paused for a moment and rubbed his brow, thinking. “Where are they now?”

“They were confronted by three security drones a short time ago. However, they took evasive action by utilizing one of the many mines in that area as an escape route. The mine entrance collapsed during the confrontation, so scout drones are now searching for another way in.”

“They must be stopped, you hear? And if they have an EPR device with them, it must be acquired—intact.”

“It will be so. Just one question, sir.”

“What?”

“Our understanding is that the entity known as Scott McNabb has a significant relationship factor with your extended family by

virtue of his association with Miranda Lee-VanHeilding. What outcomes would you prefer for this entity?"

"Kill him...without prejudice. And please ensure that the rest of his associates do not leave this planet alive."

"Understood, sir."

- *Connection Terminated* -

THE MINE

From the depths of the utter blackness two motes of light appeared, dancing in rhythm, growing in size and brightness. As they moved closer and closer, Scott's brain tried to make sense of this phenomenon. Was he really seeing this, or was it just in his mind—a dream perhaps, or maybe a hallucination?

The lights began to take form and shape, and soon he began to make out two ghostly figures moving toward him. They stopped and knelt beside him. He recognized their faces—Cyrus Sanato and Dr. Stephanie Rayman.

Cyrus reached out and fiddled with Scott's helmet, finally popping open his visor. Scott coughed and retched as his lungs took their first taste of the stale, dusty air.

"He's still alive," someone said. Scott wasn't sure who.

"Scott? Scott...are you injured?" This time he recognized the voice as Dr. Rayman.

He mentally examined the extremities of his body and tentatively moved his head followed by an arm. This last action sent a wave of pain rippling down his right side. He gasped.

"Easy, buddy," said Cyrus.

"Just take it slow," said Steph.

Scott eased himself into a sitting position and rested his back against the wall, which resulted in another stab of pain rifling through his body. He clutched his ribcage, and his face contorted in pain.

"Can you feel your legs?" said Steph as she moved closer to remove his EVA suit helmet.

"Yeah, I think so."

"Does that hurt?" Steph poked at the ribs on the right side of his body.

Scott yelled.

"I'll take that as a yes," she said. "You've got a couple broken ribs there. Looks like that EVA suit took most of the blast. Can you stand up?"

“Yeah, maybe. Can you give me a hand?” Again, pain rifled down his right side as Scott tried to move. Cyrus and Steph came to either side of him and grabbed an arm each, helping him up off the floor of the mine entrance and into a standing position. He gasped several times as the pain in his broken ribs made itself known.

“Shit, what a mess.” He clutched his ribs.

“You need to get out of that EVA suit. I can bandage your ribs and give you something for the pain, but that’s the most I can do.”

Scott looked up and tried to see around him, but it was difficult as the space was dark, and dust filled the air. “Spinner? Jonesy?”

Steph and Cyrus looked from one to the other. “Jonesy’s dead,” Steph finally said. “He was crushed by falling rock when the entrance caved in.”

“Goddamn it.” Scott shook his head. “I shouted at him to hurry, but he just kept on shooting at that drone.” He reached up and rubbed his skull. “And Spinner, is he all right?”

“He’s okay, sort of.”

“What do you mean, ‘sort of?’”

“He was farther down the entrance tunnel, so he escaped most of the blast, but...he’s taking Jonesy’s death pretty bad.”

Scott lowered his head and sighed. “Where is he now?”

“Up near the entrance, sitting beside the body,” said Steph as she began to help him out of the EVA suit.

“I better go and check on him,” said Cyrus, who walked off toward the entrance. “What are the radiation levels like in here, Steph? I feel a bit exposed with no suit.”

“Fine for the moment. And it’s probably a lot less if we move farther in.”

“Did the quantum device survive?”

“Cyrus thinks it’s okay, and the mule survived, too. Just as well, because it was carrying this medical kit.” Steph knelt and broke out a syringe from the kit as she spoke. She cracked open the seal and jabbed it into Scott’s side. “This will help reduce the pain.”

It took a few more minutes for Scott to gather himself together and put the EVA suit back on. He left his helmet visor open, and the suit powered down. He did not want to use any more of its resources than necessary. When they had finished, the two of them slowly made their way back up to the entrance.

Cyrus was sitting beside Spinner, who cradled Jonesy’s head in his

lap. Cold, dead eyes looked up at them through a tangled mass of hair and blood.

Spinner glanced up as Scott and Steph came over. “We were going to open a bar, you know...back in Jezero City...from the money out of this gig.” He looked back down at the face of his now dead friend.

Scott didn’t know what to say. What could he say? Nothing that would do any good, that was for sure. He just sighed and looked at the looming wall of rock blocking the entrance to the mine. “We’ll have to dig ourselves out of here.”

“Not a chance,” said Spinner.

“Why not?” said Cyrus.

“Because there’s just too much rock, and a good deal of it is too big for us to move without machines.”

Cyrus stood up and moved over to the wall of rock, casting the light from his helmet across its surface. “We have to try.”

“If we had some equipment, then sure, no problem,” said Spinner. “But all our gear was destroyed when the mule blew up.” He looked up at them. “Trust me, this is what I do—moving rock—and there’s no way we can dig our way out of here.”

“Then we’ll just have to find another way out,” said Scott as he turned on his helmet’s light and looked back down the tunnel.

It took some time to get themselves together, and for the realization to finally sink in that there was simply no way back out through the entrance. They were trapped inside the old mine, and the only option was to find another exit. Since no one knew how long that would take—or if they would find one at all—they eventually agreed to shut down their EVA suits and breathe the air in the mine. It was stale and dusty, but the radiation levels were low, and getting lower as they moved farther into the mine.

However, this meant they couldn’t use their heads-up for low-light environments, as this was integrated into the visor. And since they needed the visor open so they could breathe, they now had to rely on old-fashioned lights to see where they were going. Except for Cyrus; his augmented vision allowed him full clarity in almost complete darkness, so he took the lead. Fortunately, the quantum device had survived the drone attack unscathed, along with the robotic mule, so there was that, at least.

Spinner had been reluctant to leave the body of his colleague just lying on the dusty floor—abandoned, so to speak—and it took

both Scott and Steph some time to persuade him that they had no other option. What finally persuaded Spinner in the end was Scott's suggestion that he could stay with the body while the others looked for a way out. If and when they found one, they would come back for him. This seemed to trigger Spinner's survival instincts, and so he reckoned he had a better chance by sticking with them.

They moved slowly and in silence, each lost in their own thoughts. For Scott, it was clear that the mission was turning out to be a disaster. Jonesy was dead, and all the equipment they would need to gain access to the facility where Athena was situated had been destroyed. As for the shuttle, all his attempts to raise Razzo on comms were met with static. Either the transmission could not penetrate the tons of rock that surrounded him, or the shuttle had been found by a scout drone and possibly destroyed. In his heart, he hoped that the former was the more likely scenario.

For Scott and the team, the reality was that they were trapped inside a labyrinthine mine, running low on resources, with little hope of escape. There was now absolutely no prospect of achieving the mission objective. At best, all they could hope for was survival, and even that seemed tenuous. The only upside, if you could call it that, was that the drones couldn't pursue them into the mine.

The tunnel was low and narrow, so they moved in single file. Cyrus took the lead, with Steph and Spinner behind. Scott took up the rear, with the mule following along. Every now and again, the tunnel would widen a little, with alcoves on either side. The first time they encountered these they had hoped it might be an intersection, but it was not to be. For the most part, the tunnel stayed straight and true, descending farther and farther into the mountain.

They had walked for around a kilometer or so—Scott wasn't really sure—when the tunnel widened dramatically and they found themselves entering a huge natural cave. They stopped, casting the light from their helmets around the cavern. Great, broad stalactites dropped down from above, and some had even joined up with their corresponding stalagmites to form natural columns.

The path they were on seemed to skirt the western edge of the cavern, disappearing again into another tunnel on the far side. As Scott moved his head to peer into the cavernous blackness, he glimpsed a reflection. He moved in farther to examine it and slowly

began to realize that he was looking at a large, freshwater pond.

“Check this out—water,” he shouted out to the others.

Cyrus came over and stood beside him. “Well, at least we won’t die of thirst.”

“I wouldn’t count on it. That water could be highly toxic.” Steph moved past them and around the edge of the pond. She stopped suddenly, knelt, and waved back to the others. “Have a look at this.”

Scott and Cyrus came over and examined the area of the ground that had caught Steph’s attention. There, imprinted in the soft, sandy soil of the cave floor, was a set of human footprints.

“Ho-ly shit,” said Cyrus.

Scott knelt to examine them. “How old are these?” It was more a question to himself.

“They’re recent.” Spinner now joined them, and seemed to be pretty certain of his assessment of the footprints’ age.

“How do you know?”

He knelt and pointed to one of the prints. “The sand here is very fine and dry.” He picked up a handful and let it spill out from between his fingers. “See the sharpness at the edges of the impressions? These would round out over time, with dust falling and slight air droughts coming in from the mine entrance. But these are well-defined, which makes me think they’re recent.”

“How recent?”

“A few months, maybe. Hard to say.” He stood up and scanned the area. “My guess is that one person, or maybe two, came in from over there somewhere.” He pointed off into the gloom of the cavern. “They moved across these rocks, down to this sandy patch, and over to the edge of the pond. You can see here that they spent some time moving around.” Spinner pointed to a confused, trampled area. “Then moved off again, back the same way.”

“Maybe they were getting water?” said Cyrus.

“Possibly,” said Steph. “If so, then this might be okay to drink.”

Scott considered Spinner’s analysis of the footprints for a moment, then moved out of the sandy area and up onto a low, rocky outcrop. He scanned the gloom with his helmet light.

“See anything?” said Cyrus.

“Not really. Just more cave.” Scott stepped down and rejoined the others. “Okay, we could keep going on the path we came in on, follow it around to that exit over there, and see where it leads us.”

He pointed off to the opposite side of the cavern. "Or we could try to follow these footprints and see if it leads to another way out."

"Well, if there's someone else here, wouldn't they be worth finding?" said Steph.

"That depends," said Spinner.

"On what?" said Steph.

"On whether they want to be found."

"It doesn't matter if they do or they don't. I think it's still our best chance of finding a way out." Scott turned toward the blackness at the far end of the cave. "So, if they came in from over there, then that's where we have to go."

They all stood in silence for a moment, looking into the darkness, their thoughts only broken by the sound of the robotic mule as it clattered its way over beside them.

Scott turned around to look at it. "Well, it looks like we're all here, so let's get going. The sooner we find this person, the sooner we get out of here."

They moved off into the darkness, sweeping their lights across the way ahead. Soon they began to make out the walls and roof of the cavern as it narrowed. The path became flat and sandy, and here and there they picked up the impressions of disturbances in the dust. The route they found themselves on now had a clear pattern beaten into it. People had passed this way before, but how long ago was hard to tell.

The cavern narrowed further and became a long, winding tunnel. Natural—not made by human hands, but by the forces of nature. The base and sides were smooth and curved, with clearly visible layers of sediment laid down over the eons. Scott reckoned that it must have been an underground river at some point in the very distant past.

They found more signs of human activity: numbers and letters scratched on the walls and the rock. Not words, as such. More like codes or identifying marks perhaps made a long time ago by those who worked the mines here—or were they more recent? Again, it was hard to tell. Yet apart from the clear footprints at the edge of the lake in the first cave, they had seen little else in the way of hard evidence that someone was occupying this cave system. Still, there were hints and clues here and there: the beaten path, the markings on the walls, disturbances in the soil that were clearly made by human activity.

They made slow progress, mostly because they all concentrated on trying to penetrate the darkness to search for clues, sweeping their helmet lights around, trying to pick out something that could give them hope that they might find a way out.

Their progress was further hampered by Spinner, who had grown more detached and sullen, and now seldom spoke. He would lag behind, as if each step required a Herculean effort on his part. Sometimes he would simply stop and stare at the ground, lost in his grief and emotional trauma. Scott, for his part, could not bring himself to play the tough leader and kick Spinner's ass to get him moving again. He had lost his friend, whose broken and battered body now lay dead at the mouth of the mine, so Scott just didn't have it in him to compound the miner's misery. Instead, it was left to Dr. Rayman's more practiced bedside manner to coax Spinner out of his paralysis and continue on with the search.

They had moved along in this torturous stop-start manner for some time when the tunnel finally widened and opened out into yet another vast cavern. So big that their helmet lights were barely able to perceive its depth in the darkness. The air changed, too, becoming cooler and less stale, and there was a hint of something vaguely botanical.

Scott found himself taking deep, satisfying breaths. "The air feels fresh here," he said as he took another deep breath. "Could be coming in from outside somewhere. What's the radiation level like, Steph?"

She checked her monitor, tapping on some icons to perform a detailed analysis. "Virtually nonexistent."

"Is that not a bit strange?" said Scott. "This air must be coming from outside the cave system, which means we should be seeing a rise in radiation levels."

Cyrus stood in front and scanned the cave from left to right. He raised a hand to signal them to stop moving. "Everyone, wait up."

"What is it?" Scott whispered.

"People—lots of them. I count fifteen, maybe twenty."

Scott moved his helmet light across the cavern, but he could see nothing but stalagmites. He noticed that Steph and Spinner were doing the same. "I can't see anyone," he whispered again.

"They're hiding in the darkness, but I see them. I'm detecting their heat signatures on infrared. Also...they're armed."

"Shit." Scott delicately unclipped the plasma pistol strapped to

his right thigh. The others did the same. “What are they doing, Cyrus?”

“Nothing at the moment. Just waiting. I don’t think they realize we can see them. And I don’t think they’re security personnel.”

“How come?” Scott flicked the safety off on his weapon.

“Their weapons are ancient ballistic guns.”

“Seriously? Gunpowder?”

“As far as I can tell.”

Steph slowly moved up beside them. “What do we do?”

“I think—” But Scott’s sentence was cut short by a barrage of bright, incandescent light that burst out from the blackness. He instinctively raised an arm to shield his eyes from the intense brightness. As his brain slowly recalibrated his vision to accommodate the dramatically increased light level, Scott began to see ghostly figures move out from the shadows and surround them on all sides. As his eyes adjusted more, and the figures moved farther into the light, he realized that this was a ragtag group of civilians. Dirty and dusty, thin and gaunt—almost feral. They all carried ancient ballistic weapons, which were deadly nonetheless, and they were all aimed directly at them.

A voice broke out from the throng. “If you want to keep living, then I suggest you stop right there. Nobody move.”

SHIN-AU-AV

Scott's brain frantically tried to assess the threat level. It was clear that this group wasn't military, so that was something. But that didn't mean they were friendly, either, judging by the number of weapons aimed at them. He fought off the instinct to raise the plasma pistol he held in his right hand, just in case it might spook some trigger-happy member of this ragtag tribe. Instead he raised his left hand in a gesture of submission—a gesture to indicate that nobody should do anything stupid.

A member of the group slowly emerged from the shadows and stood between two bright floodlights. He was a heavysset, middle-aged man, clean-shaven with tightly cropped hair. Unlike the others, he carried a sophisticated plasma weapon, but still had it slung over his shoulder. On either side of him, two more figures emerged and kept pace; both had ballistic weapons aimed threateningly at Scott and the crew.

The figure stopped a few meters ahead and looked each of them over with a curious eye. "I take it you guys are not from around here?"

Scott took a cautious step forward. "Eh...yeah, we're a scientific survey team and we're...eh...lost."

"Survey teams don't usually shoot down scout drones."

"That was a mistake," said Scott. "It wasn't intentional."

"Really? Well, just so there are no more *mistakes*, I want you to—very gently—place all your weapons on the ground and then back away...slowly."

Scott carefully lowered his pistol to the ground and turned around to ensure that the rest of the crew was also going to comply. The way he saw it, they had no choice but to do what they were asked. Cyrus and Steph were already depositing their weapons on the cave floor, but to Scott's dismay, he could see Spinner crouched behind the robotic mule, his plasma weapon in hand, ready to fire.

He raised a hand to him. "Spinner, just put it down."

"No way." Spinner's eyes darted this way and that. "I'm staying

right here.”

The mood in the cave changed noticeably. Scott could hear people shifting position and more weapons being drawn. He raised his other hand and stepped in front of Spinner. “Take it easy. This isn’t going to help.”

The miner said nothing, just gripping the weapon tighter. Scott started to get the feeling that this was not going to end well. He really didn’t care if Spinner got himself killed in a shootout. Sure, it would be tragic—pointless, even. But he could live with it. However, what he did care about was a stray bullet damaging the quantum device strapped to the mule that Spinner was using as cover.

“Spinner...it’s okay.” Steph moved over and placed a hand on the muzzle of the miner’s weapon. He looked up at her, and slowly the fight leaked out of him. He lowered the weapon and placed it on the ground. There was an audible sigh of relief in the cavern, and the group relaxed a little.

Their leader stepped in closer. “Now if you’d all just move back a few paces, that would be great.”

Scott and the crew did as they were told, and several of the ragtag group moved forward to pick up the weapons. Now that they were disarmed and no longer a threat, Scott ventured a request. “Look, all we need is just to find another way out of here. Can you help us?”

But his request was ignored. Instead he was grabbed on both sides, his arms twisted behind his back, and his wrists tied together with cable. He heard the shouts of protest from the others as they were all subjected to the same treatment. Their helmets were then forcibly removed, and Scott felt the muzzle of a weapon shoved into his back, prodding him to start walking. All the lights suddenly extinguished, and Scott found himself completely disoriented until he began to pick out dim illumination emanating from lights that each of the group seemed to carry.

He started walking, following behind what seem to be a long line of people. Several times he tried to look back and see where the others were, but each time he was poked in the back, and couldn’t find out where they were or how they were holding up.

As they walked, he estimated the size of the group to be upward of twenty members. Their clothes were lightweight and utilitarian, with a lot of belts and pockets. He noticed, too, that they all had

face masks or scarves that they used to cover their mouths and noses. He realized that this group must live in these caves, and there were probably a great many more. None of the reconnaissance data that Scott and the team had studied before the mission had given any indication of people living anywhere in the Wasteland. In fact, it was presumed that no humans existed for at least a million square kilometers. Yet here was a population eking out an existence in the caves and mines, safe from radiation, undetected. Were there more groups like this? Or was this just an isolated population?

These and many other questions percolated in Scott's brain as he made his way along a maze of paths and tunnels, with a helpful prod in the back every now and again from the business end of a ballistic weapon.

They had twisted and turned their way through this subterranean system for what seemed like half an hour when Scott started to see evidence of recent engineering. Ducting and cabling ran along the walls and overhead illumination would activate automatically as they moved. He could also feel the blast of cool, fresh air being dispensed by vents placed periodically in the overhead ducting. It was becoming clear to him that they must have a significant source of energy somewhere to power all this infrastructure. But it was another half hour before they came to the first serious piece of heavy engineering: a three-meter-diameter airlock which terminated a short tunnel they had just entered. Scott recognized this airlock as the same one used on a standard interplanetary cargo transport. They must have scavenged it, disassembled it, and re-engineered it to fit this space.

The outer door cracked open and the first group of fifteen, including Scott, marched in. As they shifted and sorted themselves inside the airlock, Scott caught a glimpse of Cyrus. The two exchanged a glance. Cyrus nodded, and then gestured with his eyes around the airlock. Scott could see that he was impressed with the engineering.

Before the outer door shut, Scott looked back to see Steph with Spinner close beside her. He was also relieved to see the mule, still fully laden, tagging along beside them. The outer door shut, and the airlock began to recycle the air. One by one, the members of the group started removing face masks and scarves, and they all began to noticeably relax. Scott got the impression that whatever lay beyond the inner doors of this airlock served as home to this group,

and they eagerly awaited it.

When the inner doors finally opened, Scott was surprised by what he saw. It wasn't quite what he had been expecting. He had imagined more of the same—dusty tunnels and dark, gloomy caverns—but this was different. The doors opened out onto a sleek, wide, manmade platform. What happened next was even more surprising: it started to descend down a smooth-walled shaft. The descent was short, perhaps fifty meters or so. Finally, another set of well-engineered doors opened to reveal what could only be described as a subterranean city built inside a vast, domed cavern. Scott stood in wonder for a moment and then had to remind himself that he was not in one of the colonies of the outer worlds, but on Earth itself.

From their elevated position on the airlock platform, he could see down and across the floor of a cavern that seemed to go on forever. The entire space, as far as he could tell, was covered in lush, green vegetation. The sides of the cavern sloped upward and were cut into stepped terraces, most of which were also covered in vegetation. But what surprised him the most were the buildings.

All around the upper terraces were structures built from cut stone. They had arched windows and doors, two or three stories tall, all interspersed with domes and turrets. It was clearly the work of some long-lost civilization that had to predate the current occupants by many hundreds—if not thousands—of years.

The cavern floor was also dotted with similar buildings, but these had been augmented by newer structures made with modern materials: plastics, metal, concrete. Above him, the entire space was illuminated by a constellation of lights that seemed to be suspended midway between the floor and the roof of the cavern. There also looked to be hundreds of people living and working in the space. All this Scott took in during the few moments he had been standing on the platform while the rest of the group piled out of the airlock.

Soon he was again being poked in the ribs and moved onward. They took a path along the edge of a terrace for a short distance, past several of the cut-stone buildings. The craftsmanship was superb, with barely a gap between each of the stones. It reminded him of images he had seen of the Inca site Machu Picchu. The ancient age of the stones was further evidenced by the size and number of lichens growing over their surfaces.

They were finally ushered into one of these buildings not far from where they had entered the cavern. From the outside, Scott had assumed it to be small and narrow, but once he entered, he could see that it was just a facade for a much larger space that had been hacked out from the side of the cavern. It seemed to be a barracks of some kind, with stores and equipment stacked here and there. They passed through a number of locked doors until finally he was shoved into an empty stone room along with Cyrus, Steph, and Spinner. One of the group began to untie their wrists while the others kept their weapons trained on them.

Their leader stood in the doorway and, after a few moments, began to speak. "My name is Tugo, and I am the leader of this contingent. Your actions in shooting down that scout drone have caused us problems...so much so that we cannot allow you to go wandering around, either in the cave system or outside."

"So what, then?" Scott rubbed his wrists. "You're just going to lock us up here?"

"For the moment, yes. We need to discuss what to do with you."

"You can't get away with this. We're a Belt-sponsored science team—people will be looking for us."

Tugo ignored him. "I need you all to get out of those EVA suits. You won't be needing them in here."

"Why can't you just help us on our mission?" Scott tried to sound reasonable.

"Hard and all as this may be for you to understand, we are actually helping you. So just do as I say. I will see to it that some food and water is brought in to you later." He turned and left the room.

Again, Scott was having difficulty gauging the threat level. What did he mean by saying he was "helping" them? At the same time, if they didn't comply with the request to remove their EVA suits then Scott didn't doubt violence would ensue. In the end, what choice did they have?

Twenty minutes later, the four of them stood in the middle of the room while all their gear was bundled up and carried out. Fortunately, they still retained the suit's thermal inner layer, so at least they wouldn't freeze. Scott lowered himself to the floor. He was exhausted from all the walking and climbing he had been doing over the last few hours. *How long has it been since we left the shuttle?*

He couldn't tell; he had lost all track of time.

"Ho-ly shit," said Cyrus as he tried to rub some feeling back into his arms. "What the hell is this place?"

"I think it's Shin-Au-Av," said Steph as she sat down on the floor with her back against the wall.

"Shin—what?" Cyrus also sat down on the floor opposite.

"It's a legend," said Steph. "A mythical place."

"It looks pretty real to me," said Scott.

"Jonesy would have loved to see this place." Spinner had also collapsed on the floor.

"So, what now?" said Cyrus.

"We wait," said Scott. "Maybe we can convince them to help us. There's not much else we can do."

"They're not sure what to do with us," said Steph. "Our 'activities' have caused them some trouble."

"You mean, they're deciding whether to kill us or not?" said Cyrus.

Steph nodded. "Something like that."

Scott felt exhausted. Maybe his notion of getting help from this group was just fantasy. In reality, maybe he was a dead man who just didn't know it. Perhaps they all were. Yet he had no fight left; all he wanted to do was sleep. He slumped down on the hard stone floor.

They were all quiet for a moment, lost in their own thoughts, when Steph started to talk. "Before we came on this mission, I did a lot of research on this area," she said in a low, tired voice. "Apparently, long before the old Europeans came here, the original inhabitants of this region had a legend that spoke of a lost civilization living in a great subterranean city. They called it Shin-Au-Av."

"You mean this place?" said Cyrus.

"The story, as far as I can remember," she continued, "is that the wife of a great tribal leader died, and he was so distraught that he exiled himself from the real world and ventured into the underground world of the dead in search of her."

Scott got an uneasy feeling about this story. Somehow it seemed to parallel his deep, primal desire to be reunited with Miranda. He shifted a little on the stone floor and tried to rest.

Steph went on. "The great chief journeyed through tunnels and caverns and caves, bravely fighting off demons and monsters until,

at last, he came to a bottomless gorge spanned by a narrow stone bridge. When he crossed it, he entered a fabulous land full of happy, dancing people. Some of them he recognized as dead members of his tribe, so he knew his true love must be there, and he started to search for her.”

Steph looked over at Scott for a brief moment before resuming the story. “One of the people of this land decided to help the chief, and soon he and his wife were reunited. But, as always with these stories, there is a sting in the tale. Apparently, he was told he could leave with his wife, but they must not look back.”

“Don’t tell me,” said Cyrus. “Let me guess, they looked back?”

“Yup—his wife did. As soon as she looked back, she disappeared into thin air.”

“Typical,” said Spinner. “Always someone who messes up a good plan.”

Steph gave him a look, then carried on with the story. “The chief eventually made it back to his tribe, and his story became legend.”

“Interesting story, Steph,” said Scott. “You reckon this is the same place as in the legend?”

“So, you’re saying we’re in the land of the dead,” said Cyrus.

“Well, it’s just a legend,” said Steph. “However, there’s a bit more to the story.” She shifted her position and leaned in a little. “Apparently, during the early part of the twentieth century, a couple of miners working in this region stumbled into a vast underground cavern, full of artifacts of some ancient civilization. They found mummified bodies, eight or nine feet tall, along with strange carvings and tools. But, of course, they could never find it again.”

“So it was just a load of bullshit?” said Spinner.

“That’s what most people thought. Yet that started off several expeditions to find this ancient city. Needless to say, no one ever did.”

“So you think this is that place, Shin—whatever?”

“Shin-Au-Av,” Steph corrected. “It sure fits the bill.”

“Just those buildings on their own would take decades to construct.” Cyrus jerked a thumb toward the door. “These guys couldn’t have built all that on their own.”

Scott shifted his weight again to eke some comfort out of the stone. “None of that matters, anyway. The real question is: will they help us?”

INTERROGATION

Scott woke to sharp, stabbing pain in his ribs. He opened his eyes to see a guard standing over him, who proceeded to give him another kick. There wasn't much force behind it—more of a poke with his foot. But he did manage to find the spot on Scott's body where his ribs were broken.

"Wake up, they want you. Come on." The guard seemed disinterested, like it was a task he'd rather not be doing.

Scott rubbed his face and shifted his tired body into a sitting position. His ribcage ached, and he had to take a moment for the pain to subside. He glanced around the room and realized that he was alone. "Where are the others? What have you done with them?"

"They're fine. Don't worry about them. Let's get going—you're next." The guard stepped back a little as Scott rose to his feet.

"They better be, or there will be hell to pay."

"Yeah, yeah...come on." He gave Scott a push in the back to get him moving toward the door.

He was taken to an area within the same building complex, though this one had a little more infrastructure. A long wooden table with a number of benches around it took up the center of the room. The room itself was sparse, save for some overhead lighting and what looked like a retinal scanner beside the main door. Three people sat on one of the benches along one side of the table. Two men and one woman, and all looked to be middle-aged. Scott recognized the central figure as Tugo, the leader of the group that had overwhelmed them in the cave. A disheveled holo-tablet sat in the middle of the table, currently projecting a 3D rendering of the local topography.

Tugo switched it off as Scott entered. "Take a seat." He gestured to a bench on the opposite side of the table.

Scott sat down, and the guard that had escorted him left the room. The mood was calm, almost relaxed.

Tugo then gestured to either side of him. "This is Esa, and this is

Adsa, and what all three of us would like to know is what the hell you guys are doing so far from home.”

“What have you done with the others?” Scott was keen to get straight to the point.

“Your comrades are fine, so don’t go worrying about them,” Tugo replied with an irritated wave of the hand.

“So where are they?” Scott persisted.

Tugo raised a pointed finger. “We’re asking the questions here. So settle down, Commander McNabb.” He said Scott’s name like an accusation. “So,” he continued, “care to tell us what you’re doing in this neck of the woods?”

Scott sighed. “We’re just a science team.”

“Doing what, exactly?” The woman on the left, Esa, leaned back as she spoke.

“We’re collecting data on the biology of the region, studying how lifeforms develop in a high-radiation environment.”

“So, you’re an off-world science team searching for signs of life on Earth. Any idea how ridiculous that sounds?” They started laughing.

“That’s not what I said.” Scott was beginning to get irritated. “Knowing how plants behave in an irradiated environment is very useful in terms of crop production on planets without a magnetosphere.”

Tugo grunted. “Perhaps. But here’s the thing: it’s complete bullshit, isn’t it?”

Scott stayed silent.

“There’s no record of a science team operating in this region.” Adsa had taken up the baton now. “So, whatever it was you guys were up to, you had no authorization. That’s why that drone was sent in.”

“Like I said, we’re just collecting data,” Scott finally said.

Tugo sat back and considered Scott for a moment. “So why did you shoot it down?”

Scott sighed again. “That was a mistake.”

“Damn right it was.” Adsa leaned across the table as if he was about to attack Scott.

Tugo placed a hand on Adsa’s shoulder and gently pulled him back. He sat down again.

“Hey, I agree—it was stupid. Jonesy...he got spooked. Started taking potshots at it, and somehow he managed to hit it.” Scott

shook his head.

"You have no idea, do you," said Esa, "about what you started by shooting down that drone."

"Well, it did seem to take it rather badly, since it sent a load of its buddies after us."

"We know all about that." Tugo leaned in again. "Here's the thing, Commander: those security drones don't give up. They're still out there, and they're going to hunt you down for as long as it takes." He sat back. "If not for us, you and your team would all be dead. So why don't you cut the crap and tell us what a bunch of off-worlders are doing poking around in the Wasteland?"

"I keep telling you, we're a science team."

Tugo sighed.

"So where are you from? Who's funding this...science mission?" Esa asked.

"It's an expedition co-funded by the Belt and Mars."

"Since when did the Belt and Mars become such good buddies?" she asked with a vague sneer.

Scott just shrugged his shoulders. "Who knows."

"There's no way the algo would allow any kind of off-world expedition down here, so we know you're talking crap. There's no point in trying to convince us otherwise," said Adsa.

"The algo... What's that?" Scott was genuinely unsure of what this meant.

"The algorithm. It's the AI that controls everything here," Adsa continued. "There's no way it would sanction such a mission."

Scott realized that they were no experts in interrogation. He could keep his story up all day long and they would never find a way through. But who were these people? They clearly knew the area intimately, as well as the machinations of the "algorithm," as they called it. The risk for Scott, of course, was he knew very little about who they were and, more importantly, what they stood for, if anything. So, could he trust them with the truth? Yet if Scott had any hope of achieving the mission objective, then they could potentially be of enormous help.

"Look, we can go on and on like this forever. But it's still going to be the same answer. And while we appreciate you getting us out of a jam back in the cave system, I really don't appreciate being incarcerated and prevented from continuing with our mission. So why don't we all just shake hands and we can go on our merry

way?”

“Two reasons why that’s not going to happen,” said Tugo. “One, you guys wouldn’t survive for more than ten minutes outside in the Wasteland. The drones would find you, and you would all die in a hailstorm of laser fire.” He leaned forward and gestured with his hands. “Not that we really care that much if you live or die, but what we *do not* like is the increased drone activity that this scenario would lead to. Which brings me to the second reason.

“You have brought yourselves to the attention of the algorithm, and it is not going to be satisfied by simply killing you all. Like us, it wants to know what you’re doing here. And let’s be clear: it knows you’re not here to collect data on creosote bushes and tumbleweeds.

“If you were to venture outside again, the algo would be sniffing your charred remains to glean any bit of data it could, and data is what it feeds on—it has an insatiable appetite for data. Now that you’ve managed to move it up to operating on a security protocol, it’ll leave no stone unturned to figure out what you lot were doing here.”

He gestured to his associates. “Our hope is that by holding you here, the algo will be satisfied that you all died in the explosion at the mine entrance and will scale down its operations. But this is looking increasingly unlikely. New drones have already entered the territory, adding to the search.

“This puts our future here in a difficult position, Commander McNabb. For a great many years, we have lived and prospered in this subterranean city, completely hidden from the gaze of the algorithm. We have our ways of avoiding detection by the scout drones that regularly fly over this region. But security drones are a different thing entirely, particularly ones that are hell-bent on finding answers.

“You see, we live off-grid as free people. And to be off-grid—not connected to the data networks, and by extension the algorithm—is illegal, punishable by death. So, Commander McNabb, what you and your team of bozos have instigated means that we are now in a fight for our very survival.”

Tugo sat back, almost slumping into the seat as he did. His mood was sanguine, also reflected in the body language of his associates. To Scott, he had the look of someone who was facing a difficult task and, in that sense, Scott could empathize with their

predicament. *If only we had stayed with the shuttle*, Scott told himself. *Maybe things would have been different.*

“There was a shuttle that we came down in.” Scott’s voice was low and solemn. “It was damaged during the flight through the electrical storm. We had to abandon it, and the pilot was left to try to fix it. Do you know if it’s still there?”

Esa shook her head. “Sorry, they came for it. A VanHeilding shuttle landed a short time ago with a number of security personnel. There was a shootout. Your pilot survived, but she has been taken prisoner by them, no doubt for interrogation.”

Scott lowered his head. “Shit.”

Again, Esa shook her head. “Whatever your pilot knows, then we have to assume that the algorithm will soon know, too. So, we would really like to find out what we’re up against here.”

It was as Scott feared: even though Kyah Razzo didn’t know the true nature of the mission, it wouldn’t take the algorithm long to figure it out. There was no other option now in Scott’s mind but to come clean with this group, tell them about their plan to integrate Athena into the pan-solar QI network, and try to get their help in accomplishing it.

But first he needed to talk to the rest of the team, make sure they were all okay, and that they all agreed to this course of action. He leaned in again and rested his arms on the table. “Let me see my team first, then we can talk again. There may be a way out of this for both of us.”

None of them said anything for a moment; they simply sat passively and considered him. Finally, Tugo sat forward. “Very well then. But no more bullshit.”

Scott nodded.

Esa tapped her earpiece and spoke in a language that Scott didn’t recognize. A few moments later, the guard entered and they all rose. Just as Scott was about to follow the guard out, Tugo came around from the other side of the table and looked him in the eye. “Just so you know, time is not on our side. So, if you have something, we want to hear it sooner rather than later.”

Scott nodded and followed the guard out of the room.

THE COUNCIL

Scott was relieved to find all the others waiting for him when he returned to the holding cell. They had all been interrogated, in one form or another, by different members of the tribe. But none had revealed the true nature of the mission. They had stuck to the line that they were a scientific mission collecting data on the biology of the region. Even Spinner, to his credit, stuck to the script. Yet their collective mood became somber when Scott broke the news that the shuttle had been commandeered and the pilot, Kyah Razzo, taken by VanHeilding personnel.

“The way I see it,” said Scott, after their initial discussions had subsided, “is that we need to persuade these people to help us. It’s the only way we can salvage this mission now.”

“While I get the impression they don’t want to do us any physical harm,” said Cyrus, “actually helping us might be asking too much.”

“We don’t even know anything about them,” said Steph. “We don’t know who they are, where they came from, or what their ideology might be.”

“One thing is for certain: they don’t like AI, or the ‘algorithm’ that they keep going on about. Which puts us both on the same page. So, I say we come clean and tell them that our mission is to subvert the algorithm. They have to buy into that.”

“Maybe,” said Cyrus.

“It’s also pretty obvious that they know every nook and cranny in these mountains. If there’s a way into that facility, then they’ll know it. I’m certain of that.”

“But it’s risky,” said Cyrus. “If word gets out that a pan-solar alliance is trying to undermine Earth-based AI, then everything goes into lockdown. It’ll be extremely difficult to get anywhere near *any* QI here on Earth after that.”

“They probably already know, now that they have Razzo,” said Scott.

“In that case, I don’t see that we have any other option,” said

Steph.

“And what if they don’t help us?” said Spinner. “What happens then? Are we stuck here forever, with no way off the planet? Living like troglodytes?”

“We could always try to escape,” said Cyrus. “They have fairly primitive technology here; they’re not that sophisticated. We would still need to get our EVA suits back, and the mule with the quantum device. But I don’t figure it would be too difficult to sneak out of here, considering I can see in the dark and they can’t.”

“And then what?” said Steph. “We wander around in the caves like we did before?”

“There’s got to be a way out,” said Cyrus.

“Okay, Cyrus, I hear you. But let’s call that Plan B for the moment,” said Scott. “My gut feeling is that no matter what way we slice and dice this, the best option is to get them working for us, helping us get into that facility. However, if we are going to persuade them, then we’ll have to give them the full story. We’re here to undermine the algorithm—that should be music to their ears.”

Eventually, after some further back and forth, they all agreed to take the risk of exposing the mission plan to the tribe. It was their only real option. So, after a few minutes of Scott banging on the inside of the door and hollering for some attention, a guard finally came and opened it.

“Tell Tugo that we’re ready to talk turkey.”

The guard was sullen, like he had been disturbed during some more important task. He replied with an imperceptible nod, and pushed Scott back inside as he closed the door and it locked again. They waited. It didn’t take long; less than ten minutes later, the door swung open, and Tugo entered flanked by four guards. He gestured to them. “Let’s go.”

They were brought to the same room that Scott had been interrogated in earlier, but this time there were at least a dozen people waiting for them. The room felt crowded. A bench was moved against the back wall, and they were instructed to take a seat. In front of them, around a dozen or so members of the tribe sat on three sides of a long wooden table. It reminded Scott of the painting he once saw of *The Last Supper* by Leonardo da Vinci.

The previous time he had been here, he hadn’t taken much

notice of the room. Now though, he could see that it was more ornate than he had first realized. The walls were made of cut stone in a complex, geometric pattern. Above the doors and windows, the sills were engraved with strange symbols and decorative flourishes. The floor was an intricately patterned mosaic, worn and dusty.

The group jostled and murmured as they organized themselves on one side of the table. There was a mix of both men and women, and all seemed to be of a similar age—not old, but not young, either. They had a similar look, too: thin, sinewy, their faces almost gaunt, and a pallid complexion, presumably as a result of living underground in the absence of natural sunlight. Their clothes were old and worn, patched and repaired several times over, their shoes a mix of repaired boots with soles made from the recycled tires of antique wheeled vehicles.

Scott tried to gauge the hierarchy of this group by the way they were arranged around the table, but it was hard to tell. Tugo sat three from the center, and Scott wondered if the power structure radiated out from the central pair, with the least important people at the end of the table. It might have seemed like a minor observation, but in Scott's mind it was important that he could identify the leader of the group. This would be the person he ultimately needed to persuade.

Eventually, after much shuffling and sorting, a hand was raised by an older woman who sat at the very edge of the group. The others fell silent as she turned to Scott and the crew. "I am Padooa. We are ready. You may begin."

This threw Scott a bit. Was she the leader, or was it someone else? Then a thought struck him: maybe they didn't have a single leader. Perhaps they were a collective of some kind. Even so, one or two of these people must have been the primary influencers—but who? But he was wasting time thinking about it, so he began.

For twenty minutes, Scott explained their mission: how it had come to be, and what was at stake. He talked about how ever since inter-AI communication had been reestablished on Earth, the planet had descended into war and chaos and that entropy was now cascading across the entire solar system. Warships from The Seven, the major corporation that controlled Earth, were already massing on the frontier of the Belt, waiting for an opportunity to take control of its resources, and in the process, subjugate the populace to the

jackboot of the algorithm. He found himself using the term “algorithm” more and more, as each time he did he could see a reaction in many of the council members. This was their enemy—this was what they feared. It cut to their very hearts.

He talked of Mars, and how it too was under threat. Not even its wealth and resources could hold back a determined onslaught from Earth. As he talked, Scott had the feeling that they were not aware of any of these developments. Their worldview was limited to this cave system, its surroundings, and a vague understanding of the politics of the broader world. Some shook their heads as he spoke, others nodded, but all were engaged by his narrative.

So, he pressed ahead, explaining that the only thing preventing all-out war in the Belt was the influence and intervention of the QIs, a network of quantum intelligences comprised of Aria on Mars, Minerva on Ceres, and the great Solomon on Europa. There were others, but these three constituted the main bulwark against the advance of the algorithm, and the total domination of the System by The Seven.

Soon he began to notice the mood and body language of the council changing again. Much as they loathed the pervasive hegemony of the algorithm, they seemed to regard the QI with even greater suspicion and a barely concealed disdain. Nevertheless, Scott was in deep, and he had no option but to continue.

He explained the uncanny ability of a quantum intelligence to manipulate the preprogrammed objectives of an AI. In essence, they had the ability to reorient the algorithm. This was how they prevented the warships of The Seven from instigating an attack on the Belt. But they could only perform this feat in real time, where data transfer rates were high. They also had the problem of coordinating their efforts across the enormous time lags that bedeviled communication throughout the vast distances of the solar system.

Scott saw that they were now becoming interested; they were leaning in across the table more, focusing on his story. He proceeded to tell them about the superluminal quantum communication device, how it came to be, how it was lost and then found, and ultimately, how it could only be utilized by a quantum computer.

At this point, a central figure at the council table broke in. “But that’s not possible. How—” But before he could finish his sentence,

the woman who had commenced proceedings, Padooa, raised her hand, signaling him to be quiet. He looked at her, closed his mouth, and sat back in silence. She then turned back to Scott. "Please proceed."

Scott continued, explaining that the superluminal device utilized quantum entanglement—a matched pair of entangled particles. And as such, each device was in fact two units that mirrored each other's input and output instantaneously, even over vast distances.

This device enabled the QIs to establish a pan-solar communications network that operated in real time. It was a network that had grown to embrace all QI that operated in the solar system. This was what held the line against the greed of The Seven, and the onslaught of Earth's ambitions.

But it wasn't without its vulnerabilities. Agents, operating outside the remit of the algorithm, had already destroyed two ships in the network. Also, several attempts had been made to sabotage both Aria and Minerva. Fortunately, both attempts had failed. But they served to underscore the vulnerabilities within the System.

Scott paused for a moment so that the assembled group had some breathing space to digest the story he had just told. They murmured and shifted, but ultimately no one spoke or asked any questions. *Now is the time*, he thought, *to explain the mission and its purpose.*

"While the off-world colonies—with the help of the QI network—can hold the line out in space, to have any hope of stopping the war permanently we need to integrate a trusted QI based here on Earth. Once we connect that to the pan-solar network, then it could, in theory, undermine the algorithm at its source."

This got them all buzzing. Scott could feel the mood in the room changing. He continued. "The target chosen was a QI known as Athena. It resides deep within the derelict Dyrell research facility in this region." Scott could see a few of the council members nodding at the mention of Athena. They clearly knew of it.

"This particular QI was chosen for a couple reasons. Firstly, since the facility was destroyed during the Rim War, the QI is presumed inoperable and nonfunctioning by the algorithm. Secondly, the nature of the destruction to the facility means that access to this QI had been closed off under mounds of rock. Also, the high radiation levels in this area make it very inaccessible. Lastly, by a quirk of fate, it had been established that this QI was

originally instrumental in the development of quantum communications. Long before the facility's destruction, it had created an experimental paired device, one half of which was sent to the QI, Solomon, on Europa, enabling it to make contact. It established that Athena still existed, still functioned, and more importantly, that it could be trusted. Unfortunately, the entanglement was broken and no more contact could be established.

"So our mission...the reason why we're here...is to find a way into that facility, install a quantum unit in Athena's core, and reconnect the QI to Earth's own network." Scott paused again before finally saying, "If you help us, then we can undermine the algorithm that is currently threatening your very existence here."

The assembled council looked stunned. It was clear that they were both amazed and fascinated by the story in equal measure. There was a brief silence before they all started talking amongst each other. But Scott couldn't catch what they were saying, as the group conversed in whispers and murmurs.

Eventually, Padooa raised her hand to silence them all. She turned to Scott and considered him for a moment. "We will need time to deliberate on this."

"But why? Time is of the essence here," said Scott.

"There are many questions for us to consider, Commander McNabb."

"What questions? Surely this is cut-and-dry?"

"This is not our way. We take the long view, and we do not jump to snap decisions. We need time to consider your story, to debate it, and ultimately to form a consensus on the way forward."

Scott sat down again and shook his head.

"You may return to your quarters. We will summon you when we are ready."

The guards came forward, and the crew was marched out of the chamber like convicts waiting for the verdict of a jury.

DATATOCRACY

When they returned to their cell, they found that some dry straw had been piled up in one corner. In the middle of the space, a small table had also been brought in and set with platters of food. It was basic fare: apples, bread of some kind, and a small pot of thick stew.

Spinner kicked the mound of straw. "Is this what we're supposed to sleep on?"

No one answered. He turned his attention to the food. "Maybe they're trying to fatten us up for the barbecue?"

Scott was tired and frustrated. Perhaps he was expecting too much, expecting the tribe to jump at the chance to help them. But they were slow and bureaucratic, more concerned with talking and getting consensus than taking immediate action. He grabbed a heap of straw from the mound and placed it in the opposite corner. After grabbing some food, he finally slumped down onto the pile and began to eat. No one spoke much; they were all tired and hungry.

Cyrus bit into an apple, then held it up to the light and examined it as if he was trying to discern something within its structure that only he could see with his augmented vision. "You know, I think this is the nicest apple I've ever tasted."

"I had nearly forgotten what real food tastes like," said Steph. "I'm so sick of eating space rations."

"Me too," said Spinner as he stuffed a trencher of bread and stew into his mouth in one go. "If they really are planning to fatten us up, then all I can say is bring it on. I could eat this all day and then some."

Soon fatigue began to take hold, and the banter stopped. Each of them settled down into their own individual allotment of straw bedding and waited. An hour passed, then two, and Scott found his mind drifting and his limbs getting heavy. Exhaustion was getting the better of him, and eventually he drifted off into a deep, troubled sleep.



* * *

Scott held the burning torch high above his head and tried to penetrate the utter blackness of the stinking cave. His nostrils filled with foul-smelling air, and his heart beat with fear. All around, he could hear the creatures as they hunted him—hellish alien beasts, creatures not of this world. He moved with slow, leaden steps, each one a Herculean effort in the sodden mud that he'd found himself trudging through.

He fell. And the creatures inched ever closer, sensing their prey was weak. He tried to pick himself up, but his body could not move—would not move, like he had become paralyzed. He felt his end was close now, but still he fought the spell that bound him to the mud.

Then, in the darkness, a speck of light flickered and danced. The creatures backed off. Scott became mesmerized by this angelic light as it grew in size and brilliance, and from its center a figure began to materialize. It grew in form and shape, and finally he could see it was Miranda. She stood tall and radiant like a warrior queen. In one hand she held a spear, its tip a burning flame. At her side, a small child clung to its mother's leg, its hair a blazing halo, its eyes deep pools of light.

"Miranda," Scott cried out, and tried to raise a heavy arm to touch her.

"Scott, come to me. Come now and let us dance together back to the light."

He tried to move, but his veins were filled with lead, and he felt himself being sucked farther down in to the mud.

"Scott, why won't you come? We are here. We are waiting."

He cried out, "I can't! They have me, the demons. I cannot break free... Please forgive me."

Her face became troubled, and a maelstrom began to swirl around her and the child. It whipped and spun and the light began

to dim. She reached her hand out to him. “Scott.” But it was lost in the vortex of the storm that spun around them, sucking her back into the void—and she was gone.

Darkness closed in around Scott, and all hope was lost. He could hear the creatures coming for him—coming to take him down to hell.



* * *

“Scott? Scott...wake up.”

“Uh...” Scott opened his eyes to see Cyrus crouching over him.

“Bad dream, eh?”

He slowly sat up and rested his back against the wall. “Yeah.”

“You were doing a lot of moaning and groaning. I thought it might be a good idea to wake you.”

“Thanks.” He rubbed some feeling back into his face. “How long was I out?”

“A few hours.”

“Any word from the tribe?”

“No, but there’s been a lot of movement outside, people coming and going. Something’s going on.”

Scott glanced over to see both Steph and Spinner fast asleep. He sat up more. “What’s the problem with these guys? What’s taking them so long?”

Cyrus shrugged. “Who knows.” He sat down with his back to the wall.

“Get any sleep?” Scott asked.

“A little. It’s hard to get comfortable on a pile of straw.” He picked up a few stalks. “It’s almost medieval.”

“I’ve slept on worse. Remember that time on—” But Scott didn’t get time to finish his sentence, as the door to the cell opened and Tugo entered along with two others. Scott noticed that none of

them held weapons. This was a good sign.

“So, what’s the verdict?” said Scott. “Are you going to help us?”

“I’m bringing you to another council meeting. They will inform you there.”

“Can’t you just tell us now?”

Tugo looked him in the eye. “This is not our way. The council is the place for that.” He raised a hand. “No more questions. Let’s get going.”

Steph and Spinner were roused from their respective slumbers, and soon all four crew were being shepherded to yet another talking session. Scott wonder how these people got anything done without endlessly debating it.

This time they weren’t brought to the room where Scott had pleaded their case several hours earlier. Instead, they were herded down through the stepped terraces and along a main thoroughfare that cut its way down to the cavern basin. As they passed, people started to move out from the shadows and follow along behind. They could see others peeping out from the doors and windows of the ancient buildings as they walked by. Scott felt as if they were being displayed like some exotic animals captured on a hunt, and now paraded through the camp as trophies.

“Told you: it’s barbecue time, and they’re all out for a feed,” said Spinner.

Their destination, as far as Scott could tell, was a wide, open amphitheater. He deduced this from the crowd of people who had already taken up seats there. They were brought in to the center of this area, onto an elevated, covered dais. The canopy was made from cut stone, supported by a great many square stone columns. They halted in front of a long stone table. Behind it were seated the same council members they had spoken to earlier. This time, however, Scott could see that they had all donned formal robes and symbols of rank and stature within the tribe.

Tugo instructed them to stop. “Wait here.” He then took his place at the table.

The woman that had spoken most at the previous meeting, Padooa, rose and gestured to the assembled crowd to be quiet. Once they all settled down, she began. “We have carefully considered your request, and have reached a conclusion.”

Thank God for that, thought Scott, as he exchanged a glance with Cyrus and Steph.

“However, before we share our decision, we feel it is only fair that you should have some understanding of who we are, what we stand for, and how we came to be here.” She made an expansive gesture with both hands. “How did the world come to be this way? How did humanity become slaves to their own technology, to the point where true freedom became a vague and alien concept to most?”

Scott heard Cyrus whisper, “This could take a while.”

Padoo continued. “How did the algorithm become so powerful that it consumed the very soul of humanity?” Her voice started to rise. Scott could see she was enjoying this. “And how is it that those who choose to live free of the algorithm must hide themselves away in caves and backwaters, in the gaps and cracks of this broken planet, like a species on the verge of extinction?”

She paused for a moment, raising both arms in an all-encompassing gesture. “Look at how we live.” She was clearly preaching to the crowd now. “This is the life of the truly free, like the cave-dwellers of old. A prehistoric existence, the clock reset to the beginning of civilization. True, it is a precarious existence, but one we have chosen because we are free—free from a life lived under the eye of the algorithm.”

She paused to scan the crowd, gauging their reaction. “But it was not always so. In the beginning, the algorithm was no more than a useful toy. It could help you find your way on a map, or suggest a good place to eat. Soon, though, people realized that the more information they gave it, the more accurate its suggestions would be. So they told it what they liked to eat, what they liked to read, and even who they liked to be with. The algorithm took this data, combined it with that of millions of others, and fed back its suggestions with a complete diagnostic detachment from its consequences.

“As more of humanity’s data was absorbed by the algorithm, its suggestions became so accurate that soon, people began to give more and more of their life over to the algorithm: when they slept, how they slept, and who they slept with. Their biometrics were now a direct feed into the algorithm. They fed it ever more data on who they were, how they worked, what they learned, and how they like to be entertained.

“And so, as time passed, more and more people begin to trust the algorithm to find them the best people to meet, the best jobs to

apply for, even who they should vote for.”

Scott felt a nudge from Cyrus, followed by a whisper: “Kill me now.”

But there was no stopping Padooa. “Soon, society began to change. Subtly at first, yet over time it became clear to some that things were not right, as age-old institutions began to topple, and the fragmentation and polarization of society began to take root. Yet so powerful and useful was the algorithm in people's lives that those who gave themselves over to it completely began to prosper where others would fall behind. Now came a time where those who wished to have a good future had no option but to give themselves over to the algorithm, whether they wanted to or not. They had no choice.

“This was the time when the Dataists came to power—zealots and extremists who believed in the all-pervading greatness of the algorithm. They advocated that all people should submit every aspect of their lives so that the algorithm could create a more all-encompassing dataset. Those that resisted this intrusion into their lives were seen as hindrances to the advancement of society. They were shunned and they were vilified, and ultimately, they were persecuted.

“So strong did the Dataists become, with their quasi-religious mindset, that they began to gain executive power in many regions of Earth. It became a crime to withhold data from the algorithm, initially punishable by fines, but soon this became incarceration and finally, death by execution. So great was their belief that the future of humanity lay with the algorithm that they could not countenance errors. They feared that with an incomplete dataset, the algorithm had the potential to be wrong. This is how withholding one's personal data became a crime against humanity.” She paused a moment to assess the crowd. They were all silent, all enthralled.

Padooa continued. “All this came to pass just before the Rim War. By that time, the Dataists had the full backing and the financial muscle of the great corporations that controlled these algorithms. So they pushed for what they argued was the ultimate conclusion of an algorithmically driven world, and that was to aggregate all the great datasets into one.

“The algorithm's power was now absolute—all-pervasive and all-knowing—and the corporations, in their hubris, believed that they still had control of it. Unsatisfied with the vast wealth they had

already created through the algorithm, they now set about creating wars for no other reason than simple profit.

“But as we all know, the irony was that the algorithm was working with an incomplete dataset. The antiquated nuclear deterrence systems of the old nation-states were off-grid by design, so they had no knowledge of the systems, and so started the Rim War.”

She turned and swept a hand over the assembled council members. “But there were many of us who could see this coming. We could see the collapse of civilization, the impending apocalypse, and we had been preparing for this eventuality.

“Yet we had assumed that this apocalypse would be from some great natural event—a pandemic or an environmental collapse, or some great war that would engulf the planet. But what transpired was worse than any of those grand imaginings. This did not come as one great cataclysmic event. No, it arrived as a slow and steady undermining of freedom into a civilization where all thought and action is monitored and recorded.

“But unlike the prophecies in the great works of fiction of the past, this was not controlled by some rogue government or despotic regime. Nor was it via some flaw in the democratic process. No, we did this to ourselves. We did it by prostrating ourselves before the altar of the algorithm and the corporations that control it.”

“Jeez...she can talk. I’ll give her that,” Cyrus whispered.

Scott wondered how much of this speech was for the benefit of the assembled tribe—a manifesto to rally the troops, so to speak—and how much was to inform Scott and the crew about the foundation of this tribe. He wasn’t so sure, nor did he really care. All he wanted was their help, and if it meant he had to stand here and listen to a history lesson, then so be it.

Padoo continued. “Ironically, it was the Rim War that enabled us to escape this cybernetic servitude. We had known about this place, Shin-Au-Av, and had seen its potential as a place to live as free people and start again. So we set about preparing the groundwork over many years.

“The ancient civilization that first came here did so because a great apocalypse had befallen their people. And in that sense, we are not so different; history has a way of repeating itself. Now that this entire area had become irradiated wasteland, we knew we would be safe here. So, we gathered together our people and

traveled here a great many years ago. And here we shall stay, like the great civilization before us, to reemerge when the time is right, when the world is ready to be rebuilt anew.”

She turned to Scott and the crew. “I tell you all this so you can better understand how we came to our decision concerning your request for assistance. Yes, it is true that we abhor the algorithm and would celebrate its demise.”

At this, a low murmur rose from the assembled crowd—the first they had heard during the long speech.

“However, what you propose is to simply hand over control from one artificial intelligence to an even greater one. In our minds, this is one of the greatest mistakes of human thinking, to assume that a problem that has been caused by technology can be solved by yet more technology...and particularly one as far-fetched as faster-than-light communication. This is simply not possible.”

The crowd began to snigger a little at this.

Scott had heard enough. *How could they be so blind?* he thought. He stepped forward and requested to speak. “If I may?”

The council members looked from one to the other, unsure of what to do. But it was Tugo that finally signaled for Scott to say his piece. This came with protests from some of the other members, but it seemed that Tugo had power within this group, and they were silenced.

“You may speak,” said Tugo.

“A quantum intelligence is vastly different from the AIs that control the algorithm,” said Scott.

“In your mind that might be the case, Commander McNabb. But to us, it’s just more of the same,” said Padooa.

“They are not the same. That’s like comparing Mars to Earth. They may both be planets, but that’s about where the similarities stop.” Scott’s voice barely disguised his frustration.

“Don’t assume that we are ignorant of such technical understanding simply by how we live here,” said Tugo. He raised his hands in an encompassing gesture. “Would it surprise you to know that many of us here worked for Dyrell Labs, in that very facility that you are so anxious to get into?” He paused for a beat, but continued when Scott didn’t reply. “I too worked there. That was over fifteen years ago, and I too witnessed the...strangeness of Athena’s almost sentient abilities. But does that mean I would put my trust in it? It’s just a machine, nothing more, and in that sense,

what makes it—or any of its brethren—any different?”

“Consciousness.” It was Cyrus that replied. He had stepped forward and now took the floor beside Scott.

“Ha...you are not seriously thinking that this machine is conscious of its existence?” said Padooaa.

“It depends on your understanding of consciousness,” said Cyrus. “In many respects, it is more like you or me than it is like any of the AIs that control everything. They’re simple analytical engines, and the algorithms they run are simple task operators. Yes, they learn and they adapt, and they become ever more efficient at the task they have been assigned. But they have no real understanding of what they do, or the wider implications of their actions. They exist in the linear, straight-line world of zeros and ones, where progress is made by constantly readapting the same pattern with minor variations each time. Each iteration inches it ever closer to algorithmic perfection. It exists in a one-directional temporal path, from the past through to the present. Action, reaction. Cause, effect. There is no inherent intelligence in any of this.”

Scott looked over at his friend. He was impressed. *Maybe he should have been the one to ask for the tribe’s help*, he thought.

“On the other hand,” Cyrus continued, “a QI mind exists in the quantum universe, of which the here and now is but one possibility in a multitude of parallel possibilities. It doesn’t rely on iterative enhancement over time to reach an optimal solution. In the multiverse of the QI mind, it can observe all possible outcomes at once and simply choose the preferred outcome.”

“This is nonsense. You’re trying to blind us with clever words and scientific gobbledygook,” said Padooaa.

“Actually, this is not unlike how the human mind works.” Now Steph took up the baton. “Like how solutions to problems can sometimes come to you fully formed, in a flash of inspiration, or a *quantum* leap. Or how the human mind can solve a problem simply by sleeping on it, when the brain has subconsciously crunched the numbers, so to speak, and the solution presents itself to you when you wake up.”

Steph was on a roll now, and she stepped forward to make her presence felt. “There are many who have long considered that the biological mind has an underlying quantum component. Consider *déjà vu*, that feeling when you sense that you have been here

before. It is not a temporal phenomenon, as many have considered it in the past, but a momentary overlapping of a parallel universe—one that is very similar to the current universe. Since we now know that the human consciousness utilizes certain quantum phenomena, it can be argued that a QI mind is also capable of consciousness.”

Padooa raised a hand. “Very well. Who am I to argue with the mind of a scientist? But if what you say is true, and these...QIs are sentient, then this is worse than we thought. They may well regard human life as precious now, but what if they decide otherwise once they have achieved hegemony over the AI, and over all of humanity? As far as we on the council are concerned, they are no different to what has gone before. If anything, they are even more of a threat. So, you see, we cannot help you with this mission of yours, nor can we allow you to continue with it.”

Scott protested: “But that’s crazy. Here’s a chance to hobble the power the algorithm has over humanity...and you’re refusing to help?”

But Padooa was unrelenting. “We appreciate the sentiment of your mission to undermine the algorithm, even if it is somewhat naïve in its execution. But we here have embarked on a different journey, one that ends when the whole rotten core of humanity has finally destroyed itself and there is nothing left but ruins. Only then will we be ready to go forth and rebuild the world anew.”

Scott shook his head in disbelief.

“Furthermore, we cannot simply let you leave here and risk exposing ourselves to the outside world. That said, we are not barbarians, either. So, we have decided that you will be free to live and work amongst us.”

Scott was in shock. How could these people be so blind as not to see that this was their one opportunity to rid themselves of the absolute power of the algorithm? They had the opportunity to end the wars once and for all. They could, in effect, put the algorithm back in its box, and by doing so reverse the relentless charge toward the ultimate extinction of humanity as a species. But then again, that was what this tribe ultimately wanted: a world utterly destroyed to the point where everyone had to start again from scratch.

The lights all went on at the same time in Scott’s head. He finally got it: they *wanted* the algorithm to continue to operate. They *wanted* the apocalypse. “Ho-ly shit,” he said to himself.

But he still had one last card to play.

“You won’t get this chance again. If what Tugo said is true, and our pilot has been taken by VanHeilding, then it won’t take them long to find out what our mission is, and that we’re in possession of the quantum entanglement device. They will not give up until they find it. Your life in here, and everything you built, will be in jeopardy. If you don’t help us complete this mission, then everything you have built will be for nothing.”

Padooa waved a dismissive hand. “We know how to keep ourselves hidden. They will not find us.”

Scott stepped forward, closer to the table. “But this is crazy. You have an opportunity to be free. You—” But his sentence was cut short by a guard jabbing him in the ribs, forcing him to step back. Scott’s frustration finally boiled over. He grabbed the weapon out of the guard’s hand, and at the same time kicked him in the groin. The guard doubled over, leaving Scott holding the weapon.

Spinner, seeing his chance, grabbed a pistol out of the side holster of the guard closest to him.

Scott aimed his newly acquired weapon at Padooa. “Anybody so much as moves, then so help me God, I will blow her goddamn head off.”

Everyone froze, except for some guards who had already cocked their weapons, ready to fire.

Tugo stood up, raised a hand, and shouted, “Wait! Hold your fire.”

For a moment, there was a standoff. Cyrus and Steph moved in behind Scott and Spinner as they aimed their weapons at the council. Several guards stood around with itchy trigger fingers. Nobody moved. The assembled crowd held their collective breath.

“If you guys want to spend the rest of your days living in a hole in the ground, well...be my guest,” said Scott. “But we’re leaving with the quantum device, and we’re going to complete our mission.”

“I admire your balls, Commander,” said Tugo, his voice calm and measured. “But even if we were to simply let you walk out of here, you would have absolutely no hope of getting anywhere near that facility without being blown to smithereens by a drone. So, do us all a favor: drop your weapons and maybe, just maybe, you’ll live to fight another day.”

“He’s right,” Cyrus whispered in Scott’s ear. “This is pointless.

We don't have a chance in this fight—we're outgunned. We'll find another way...remember Plan B?"

Scott said nothing for a moment, but Cyrus's words struck home. He slowly lowered his weapon and placed it on the ground.

Spinner looked confused. "What the...you're giving up again?"

"Just drop it, Spinner. Tugo's right—we can't fight our way out of this," said Scott.

But Spinner wasn't convinced; he held the weapon tight and kept his aim on Padooa.

Steph placed a hand on Spinner's arm. "Leave it. No point in getting yourself killed for nothing."

Spinner wavered. "Goddamnit." He lowered the weapon and flung it on the ground.

Tugo stood up. "I'm glad to see that common sense has prevailed." He turned to the guards. "We're done here. Take them back, and make sure they're locked up good and tight this time."

THE SEVEN

Fredrick VanHeilding stood at the viewing gallery in his private study on board the family's orbital and gazed down upon the surface of Earth. The entire orbital space city had been moved, by his request, to a new orbit that straddled both land and sea on the western edge of the North American continent. It was a task that had required an enormous amount of energy, expended solely because of VanHeilding's personal desire to observe the patch of earth where Scott McNabb and the former crew of the *Hermes* had taken refuge.

The storm had moved off to the northeast, providing VanHeilding with an unobstructed view of the surface. His attention was now on a mountainous desert known as the Wasteland. It was a barren, toxic region, devoid of life and all but forgotten by most people. But now it was the focus of his attention, not to mention that of the algorithm, and, to a greater extent, the six other corporations that constituted the primary power block on Earth.

He checked the time on his retinal display; the meeting was about to start. VanHeilding broke his gaze from the planet's tortured surface, turned away from the viewing gallery, and made his way to sit in his comfortable antique wing-back leather chair just as an alert flashed on his display indicating that the other members were coming online. One by one, the avatars of the six other corporations began to take three-dimensional shape and form, arraying themselves around VanHeilding's private study like ghostly specters convening at a séance.

He found himself intrigued, as usual, at the avatars these individual corporations chose to take. Some were formal—true representations of the person. Others were more casual, even humorous, and yet others were garish and fantastical, a reflection of how far removed from reality these entities had become. Some, he even imagined, were possibly AI and not real people at all.

VanHeilding commenced by requesting Marlyn, the orbital's AI and messenger of the algorithm, to bring everyone up to speed on

both the nature of the incursion incident and on the progress toward apprehending the crew.

Marlyn did not utilize an avatar. Instead, its disembodied voice resonated out from nowhere. After several minutes, it had informed the assembled group of the current situation.

“So, you are saying that you have not yet apprehended these individuals?” This came from Yoko Sicon, whose avatar was an exact physical representation of her: a tall, thin, almost gaunt figure of indeterminable age. Sicon Industries were closest to the VanHeilding Corporation in power and influence, and together they formed a formidable power block within The Seven.

“They will be found and dealt with,” said VanHeilding.

“Like the way you handled the operation back on Ceres, when you concocted a ludicrous plan to acquire the quantum communications technology?” This came from Pao Xiang Zu, the most powerful of the group by quite a margin. Xiang Zu had deep roots, having stepped out into space exploration long before any of their rivals. Their style was eccentric, a byproduct of their belief in their invulnerability. But they were no fools, either. They too knew both the value and the threat that the superluminal technology posed to the AI-driven world that all of them now relied upon. “You failed us at Ceres, Fredrick. Your daughter’s treachery cost us all dearly.”

“You had your chance in Neo City, but through the incompetence of your people, you let them escape,” said VanHeilding. “So, don’t go whining to me, Pao. This is old ground. Please do not bore us all by revisiting it.”

“So, now this...McNabb character shows up on our doorstep, along with the former crew of the Hermes. Not good, Fredrick. Not good,” said Yoko.

VanHeilding shifted a little uncomfortably in his seat. “They’re trapped inside an old mine. They aren’t going anywhere.”

“They—and that meddling QI, Solomon—have set us back significantly in our efforts to acquire dominion over the Belt’s resources. They cannot be allowed to reactivate Athena.”

“I think we are all in agreement on that, Pao. But what I would like to know is, what is being done to ensure their elimination?” Yoko’s tone was less confrontational, more conciliatory.

It was Marlyn that answered. “Multiple scout drones have been assigned to seek out other entrances to the mine where the crew is

trapped. These are backed up by security drones. Also, the primary entrance is being cleared of debris, an ongoing operation that should take no more than an hour or so. After that, drones can enter and hunt them down.”

“And what about the ship they arrived in?” said Pao.

“It’s a Belt-registered ore carrier owned by the AsterX Corporation. McNabb’s crew came down amongst a group of eleven other shuttles. We have picked up all the others and established that they were all simply transporting ore from the carrier down to the surface—legitimate activity. There is no reason to believe they had any knowledge of what McNabb was doing.”

“Has the ore carrier been apprehended yet?” said Yoko.

“Unfortunately, it has left Earth’s orbit and is now in interplanetary space. We have no jurisdiction there.”

“Bullshit. It should be destroyed immediately. We need to send a message to the Belt and Mars and that scheming QI, Solomon, that we are not going to be fucked with.” Yoko was livid.

“It’s a question of resources,” said VanHeilding. “That ore carrier will be armed—an unfortunate necessity these days to repel pirates and scratcher scum. We would need a warship to take it down, and all our combined resources are busy with the blockade of the Belt.”

“The ore carrier is a distraction,” said Pris of the Wanata Consortium. She had remained quiet through most of the conversation up until now, but they were another powerful group not to be messed with. VanHeilding had experienced run-ins with them a few times, and rarely came out the better for it. Her adopted avatar was a sleek, alien-like creature that had an unnerving way of moving when she talked. “The key issue is locating and eliminating McNabb and his crew.”

“This is in hand,” said VanHeilding.

“And what about this...EPR device? This faster-than-light communication system?” said Pris.

“If their plan truly is to reactivate Athena, then they will most likely be transporting such a device, in which case we need to acquire it—intact,” said Yoko. “But remember, this is just one half of an entangled pair. The other will be with Solomon, or most likely with Aria in Jezero City on Mars.”

“Agreed. We need to secure this technology,” said Pao. “Collectively, we failed at Neo City and Europa, and again at Ceres. Now the QIs control the System from Mars and beyond.”

“They are foolish to think that they can gain some foothold on Earth. All planet-wide QIs have been isolated from the grid. There is no way out for them. This is why our enemies have conceived of such a desperate act. Athena is inaccessible, buried under hundreds of tons of rock and, even then, it is unlikely to function. It’s a ridiculous plan. All they have succeeded at doing is handing us the quantum technology on a plate,” said VanHeilding.

Marlyn’s voice commanded their attention. “Forgive me for interrupting, but some new data has been acquired that will require alteration to the acquisition matrix.”

“What the hell does that mean?” said Yoko.

“Scout drones have picked up data on other human lifeforms in the vicinity.”

“So what?” said Pris. “We know there are a few wackos living in the Wasteland. Just deal with them if you have to.”

“Data has indicated that the numbers are far greater than originally estimated,” Marlyn continued, unfazed. “As a consequence, the algorithm has advised that security personnel be deployed to the region.”

“What?” said VanHeilding. “How many of these people are we talking about?”

“The algorithm estimates a number in the hundreds, possibly as high as a thousand.”

VanHeilding stood up. “A thousand... How can this be? It’s a radioactive wasteland.”

“They live inside the mountains. This area has numerous caves and abandoned mines. It’s a warren.”

“This cannot be allowed. If these people are off-grid, then they are in violation of the law. Their data belongs to the network. Any group of that size, no matter how remote, could potentially introduce gaps in the dataset, and by extension errors in the algorithm. They must be either assimilated or eradicated.”

“Point taken, Pao. But the bigger question is whether these... vagabonds are part of the plan. Are they helping McNabb?” VanHeilding was now standing in the viewing gallery, looking down on the planet.

“Unlikely. The algorithm has concluded that they are a secretive people, primitive even. Any foreign intrusion would be viewed with deep suspicion, even hostility,” said Marlyn.

“So they could help us?” said Pris.

“Not directly. But they could hinder McNabb and his team from progressing with their mission.”

“They still need to be dealt with, and swiftly.” Pao’s avatar rippled.

“Agreed,” said Yoko.

“The algorithm concurs, and to implement this course of action, it requires the deployment of human ground forces. Thirty should be sufficient.”

“Very well.” VanHeilding waved a hand. “Give the order to dispatch thirty of our security personnel from here on the orbital immediately.”

“This is turning into a VanHeilding operation, Fredrick,” said Pao. “Let’s hope you do a better job of it than the last time you butted heads with McNabb and his team.”

“I assure you that they are going nowhere. Their plan has already failed; this is simply a mop-up operation.”

The avatars went silent for a moment. It seemed that there was nothing left to say. One by one they signed off, extinguishing like candle flames in a draught, leaving Fredrick VanHeilding with nothing more than his thoughts.

As he looked out, he could already see several shuttles preparing to leave the orbital, packed with security personnel bound for the Wasteland. *Soon, he thought, McNabb will finally be dead. Maybe this is a good time to tidy up the rest of his crap? It’s something I should have done a long time ago. My mercy is my weakness. Time to change that.*

SO IT BEGINS

The war room, as it was known, wasn't really a war room as such. Its purpose and function in the subterranean metropolis of Shin-Au-Av was not a place where battle plans were drawn up, or great campaigns planned—until now. Neither was it just a room. It was, in fact, a series of old stone buildings that had been used as storerooms and workshops ever since its current occupants had arrived and began living in these ancient ruins. Over time, as the citizens fabricated ever more elaborate and complex systems of growing food, filtering air, pumping water, and distributing energy, they tended to localize the monitoring of all these disparate systems in one place. Here, the technology of their existence could be monitored and managed, and so it became known as the war room.

The technology was rudimentary, like most else in the citadel. Antique monitors charted the rise and fall in demand for resources by the systems that enabled such a society to survive in this subterranean cocoon. Over the years, it had been added to and greatly expanded to accommodate a multitude of buildings. From their roofs, great bunches of cables and tubes snaked their way all across the central cavern basin and out to every corner of the vast cave. Some of this cabling went even further, extending beyond the cavern and its connecting tunnels out to the very exterior of the mountain itself. These provided the conduit for the cameras by which the overseers in the war room could view the outside world. The feed from these cameras was rendered in pixelated, muted color across six mismatched and slightly disheveled monitors clustered together in the war room.

An equally disheveled technician sat in front of them and pointed at several specks moving across the horizon. "There! You see them?"

Tugo rested a hand on the back of the operator's chair and grunted. "Shuttles."

Beside him, several of the tribe's elders also watched as the craft began to circle around before finally landing in the valley, where

they proceeded to disgorge a large contingent of well-armed security personnel.

Tugo and some of the others had been monitoring the buildup of drones and personnel for some time. Each new observation compounded on the last, and soon they began to lose count of the military resources accumulating against them. An estimated fifty scout drones already buzzed in the sky above, each probing and testing the access tunnels and mine shafts that peppered the area. These, at least, were easy to deal with, and the tribe had learned a long time ago how to evade detection.

The scout drone's primary function was observation, not engagement. That said, they did possess a single, low-power pulsed energy weapon. It was lethal at short range, but once fired, the drone would have to wait for a few seconds before it could fire again, giving its target a chance to take cover, or fire back—assuming they survived the first encounter. But the tribe's primary defense against detection by this drone was simply to block up the access tunnels with rubble. The drone didn't have the capability to circumvent this primitive defense; its weapons system was too weak to be effective against a mound of rock.

Tugo wasn't concerned with these drones. But there were also ten to fifteen security drones now joining the hunt, and these were of more concern. They were bigger, with a powerful laser system coupled with a formidable pulsed-energy plasma cannon. These could make short work of the hastily constructed rubble barricades that the tribe was now assembling. But their size—almost three meters in diameter—made them nowhere near as aerially dexterous as their smaller siblings, the scout drones. They couldn't navigate the narrow shafts and tunnels that a human could, so by being careful, the tribe could also avoid coming into contact with these machines.

But physical troops—that was a different matter entirely. That was ominous.

Several thoughts rushed through Tugo's mind in a swirl of trepidation. There was no way to look at this development and see any positive outcomes; they simply had no defense. Sure, they could fight, but that would mean revealing their existence and the true strength of their numbers. Once that genie was out of the lamp, there would be no putting it back.

"Shit," was all he could manage to say.

“They know we’re here,” said Adsa, who had been monitoring the buildup for some time. “We’ve been discovered.”

“They’re just looking for that crew,” said Esa. “They don’t know anything about us.”

Adsa wasn’t convinced. “I don’t like it. This is bad.”

“This is your fault, Tugo. If you hadn’t brought that crew here, then none of this would be happening,” said Padooa, who had just arrived in the war room after hearing about the buildup. “You have put our very existence in jeopardy.”

“That crew sealed our fate as soon as they landed,” said Tugo. “Bringing them here made no difference.”

“We should hand them over before it’s too late. All they want is that crew. Once they have them, we will be safe again—they’re not interested in us.”

“You really think so, Adsa? My guess is they already know about our existence. You seem to forget we’re dealing with an AI. They know way more than you could possibly imagine. It has most likely figured out, from all the tiny bits of data those scout drones have collected in the last few hours, that people are living in these caves. It has probably extrapolated our exact number based on nothing more than the level of moisture in the air. You have absolutely no idea how much an AI can divine from something as innocuous as *how the wind blows*.” He looked around at the others. “They know we’re here. They know we’re living off-grid, and they’re here to do something about it.”

“But that crew is still their top priority,” said Adsa.

“If what they told us at the council meeting is true—and I have no reason to doubt them—then yeah, that crew is number one on their list.” Tugo went back to looking at the monitors.

“Then we should hand them over now. Release them immediately so that they’re taken by the security forces—that’s really all they want.” Adsa was adamant.

“Maybe that’s all the VanHeilding Corporation wants, but the algorithm will not countenance a cohort of our size living off-grid. We will either be assimilated or eliminated.” Tugo was beginning to sound pessimistic.

“So, what are we going to do?” said Adsa.

Tugo shrugged. “That’s a very good question.”

“Screw them,” said Esa. “I say we fight.”

“We should put this to the council.” Padooa was resolute; Tugo

could sense it in her.

“Agreed. We need to establish a consensus on what action to take.” Adsa, as usual, sided with Padooa.

“Sir, you better take a look at this.” The technician pointed to a camera feed that had focused itself, as best it could, on a cluster of shuttles that had landed in the plateau. Around twenty security personnel were milling around in several groups, checking weapons and getting orders. But in the background, Tugo could see several industrial robots extraditing themselves from the cargo hold of one of the shuttles. The robots were the approximate height of a human, with tri-pointed tracked wheels at their base. The central body was well-armored and bulky, with two highly articulated arms. These machines would have no problem moving rock and rubble.

“Shit, mining bots. That’s all we need.” He stepped back from the monitors and turned to his second-in-command, Pliny, who had also been watching the military buildup. “Get Sasha, Renton, and the others. Tell them to meet me at the armory on the lower level.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And tell them this shit just got real.”

His second-in-command nodded and jogged off.

Tugo looked at the monitor again for a second, then placed a hand on the technician’s shoulder. “I’ve got work to do, but you let me know if anything else lands, okay?”

“Will do, sir.”

Tugo turned to the elders. “No one touch that crew until I get back.”

“Where are you going? We have an emergency council meeting to attend. This is critically important,” said Padooa.

He spun around. “Where am I going? I’ll tell you where. I’m going to organize the defense of this city, the defense of everything that we have shed blood and sweat and tears over for the last decade. That’s where I’m going.” He stabbed an index finger at them. “You go and talk about it all you want. And while you’re at it, if you hear the sounds of explosions and screaming, that’s our people dying out there.” He spun around again and strode out.

By the time Tugo arrived at the armory, his anger and frustration had receded somewhat. The others were all there, those that he had trained for this very moment—a moment that all of them feared would arrive someday. Well, today was that day.

By the law of averages, it was a wonder they hadn't been discovered long before now. Perhaps it had given them all a false sense of security, that they could live free and be left alone in peace. As for the Elders, he couldn't really blame them for their panic. Direct confrontation was not their ethos. After all, they were the ones who chose to separate themselves and their followers from the slavery of the outside world. But Tugo was under no such illusions. He knew the algorithm would come for them one day, and there would be no escape...only the will to fight.

The armory was an ancient stone building, isolated on a wide terrace on the northwestern quadrant of the cavern. The stonework was much older than most of the other buildings, rougher cut, but still spoke of great skill and craftsmanship by those who built it back through the mists of time. The walls were almost a meter thick, the sills above the doors and windows carved with strange symbols whose meaning had long been forgotten. They had chosen this building for both its strength and its relative isolation—just in case it accidentally blew up. Such were the risks associated with storing antique ballistic weapons and ammunition. But as Tugo glanced along the shelves and racks, he could see that they were all empty, save for the odd broken relic here and there.

His group was all here, so he wasted no time exchanging pleasantries. Instead, he sat on the slab floor, grabbed a small chalk stone, and scratched out a basic map of the cavern and its main access routes. The group gathered around.

“Have all these points been blocked up?”

His second-in-command, Pliny, knelt beside him. “Yes, all routes leading to the cavern are blocked with stone and rubble. We’ve also got teams in behind, all armed as best we can.”

“Is it true they brought in manpower...and robots?” Sasha asked.

“Yeah, around thirty or so are heading our way. They’ve got two mining bots with them.”

The group looked anxiously from one to the other.

“Those bots will make short work of any barriers we put up, so here’s what we need to do: we need to create a secondary fallback ring. The gap between the two should be set with whatever explosives we have left.” Tugo’s hand moved around the map on the floor, scratching out rough locations. “When they’re through the first barrier, wait until the tunnel fills up, and then blow it. That

should slow them down.”

“What about after that? What should we do then?” said Renton.

Tugo went back to scratching rough marks on the map. “Create low barricades to use for cover, around fifty meters back. As soon as they break through, we can start picking them off.” He looked back at the group. “Any questions?”

They shook their heads and mumbled for a moment. “What about the Elders?” said Renton. “What do they say?”

Tugo rubbed his chin and stared at them. “They’re talking about it.”

This invoked a laugh. “Great...that’s useful. I feel so much safer now.”

Tugo stood up. “They have served us well in the past, and maybe if we get through this, they will do so in the future. I’ll talk to them, see what they can do to calm those who are too young or too old to fight.”

“And that crew we captured, what about them?” said Pliny.

“They’re the reason we’re in this mess,” said Renton. “They brought all this down on us.”

“That they did. But they may yet have a part to play.” Tugo stood up. “We don’t have much time. Start getting the word out to everyone, and start getting those barriers built.”

As the group began to disperse, Tugo picked out two fighters. “You two come with me.”

“Yes, sir. Where to?”

“We’re going to visit that crew. We’re going to do something we should have done from the very beginning—and maybe, just maybe we’ll have a chance to live through this day.”

BEYOND THE CITADEL

Scott and the crew had been herded back into their holding pen after the session with the council. Scott, for his part, still found it hard to believe that the elders of the tribe wouldn't help them in their mission, preferring instead to bury their heads in the sand. The algorithm, and the AIs that controlled it, wasn't going away. In fact, it would be ramping up its attempts to find them and the quantum device. But he wasn't the only one who was frustrated.

"I really don't understand why these morons don't want to help us. I mean, this will secure their future." Cyrus waved his arms in anger.

"You have to see it from their perspective," said Steph. "They don't just hate the algorithm...they despise everything it stands for: the complete control of humanity by an AI. So simply handing that control over to a QI is just more of the same, as far as they're concerned."

Scott could see how they could think this. What was a QI but just another computer? Yet the reality was very different. As things stood in the System, the QIs were humanity's best chance of regaining order. But during the session, he came to realize that there was a deeper reason—one he'd failed to consider before revealing their mission to the tribe initially. It was simply that the ideology which sustained the tribe was the belief that one day humanity would ultimately destroy itself, and they would then be free to leave Shin-Au-Av and start a new and better era of human civilization atop the ashes of the old. They didn't just want the algorithm destroyed, but the whole rotten and corrupt world gone.

Yet he sensed that there were those around that table who didn't entirely share this view. But their voices weren't heard; instead, they bowed to the party line. Maybe their numbers were too small, or maybe there was a very good reason they chose not to challenge the authority of the majority. Either way, it mattered little now. Here they were back in the cell—back to square one.

Yet before they could start to work out how they might escape,

Spinner needed to be brought up to speed. Neither he nor Jonesy had known the true intent of the mission, and now that it was all out in the open, he wanted to know *what the hell was going on*.

The two specialist mining engineers had been contracted to help them get into the sublevels of the Dyrell facility. They also knew that the mission had its dangers, but that was all. What the crew was planning once they gained access had been kept from them.

“So, what you’re saying is that we’re planning to screw over the AI...the algorithm that controls those drones that killed Jonesy?”

“Yep, that’s the plan.”

“Well, count me in. Let’s go take them down.” It seemed that Spinner, far from being pissed off about being kept in the dark, was now eager to seek revenge. But even though it was better to have him focused on the mission than mooching around, he still viewed getting to the facility without specialist equipment as an almost impossible task.

They discussed all the possible ways they could break out of the cell, yet there still remained the not inconsiderable problems of finding their gear, finding a way out of Shin-Au-Av, then finding a way to the Dyrell facility, and finally down to where Athena was entombed.

There was also another major problem that no one, as yet, had mentioned. Even if they managed to get to Athena and connect the quantum device, would it work? As far as Scott understood it, the device should connect Athena to Aria on Mars, and by extension, Solomon on Europa. However, for them to take control of Earth-based AI, Athena needed to be reconnected to the grid, which was the Earth-based communications network. His head hurt just thinking about it all.

They discussed their options for what seemed like hours, going around and around the same problems with no obvious solution that didn’t involve high-risk, direct action—like taking someone hostage and holding a gun to their head until their demands were met. But this was a non-runner; there had to be a better way. So, it almost came as a welcome relief when the door opened and Tugo entered along with two other guards.

One guard took up a position at the door, facing out, checking up and down, while Tugo turned to them, put his fingers to his lips, and spoke very softly. “If you want out of here, then be as quiet as possible, and follow me.”

Scott looked at Tugo, trying to decide what trick was being played. Were they being released, or was there some other plan going on that he couldn't see yet? But Tugo did seem to be offering them a way out of the holding cell, so that was something, at least. Scott glanced at the others, then stood up and followed Tugo.

They moved along a dim corridor in single file, Tugo taking the lead. It was nighttime in the citadel; the lights had darkened, and only faint sounds of dripping water could be heard over the low background hum of machines. After a few moments, they exited into the cavern. Here the background sounds became louder, interspersed with distant voices. Tugo turned back to them and silently signaled that they were heading up a set of narrow steps that would eventually take them to the upper levels of the terraces. As they climbed, the sounds of the cavern below grew more muffled and distant.

Scott paused for a moment to cast a glance back down across the metropolis. It was pitch black, save for dim points of light that cascaded down from the terraces and stretched themselves out across the floor of the city. It had a shimmering, ethereal beauty, and in that moment, he could see why it was hard for some to contemplate leaving this place for the harsh, forbidding landscape of the outside world. Someone tugged at his sleeve; it was Cyrus, prompting him to keep moving.

The stone stairway wound its way up through the contours of the terraces in a confusing zigzag pattern. It finally ended on a shallow balcony jutting out from the cave wall, high up on the edge of the stone face, into which was set a highly-engineered door—an airlock. It was very similar to the one they had come in through, but this was smaller. It was another entrance to the cavern, and presumably led back into the old mine shafts beyond. Another of Tugo's people was waiting for them here. As soon as he saw them coming, he opened the door and signaled for them to hurry on.

They had spoken little throughout the entire journey. But now that they were through the door and into the tunnel on the far side, Tugo and his people began to relax a little. He gestured to them. "This way. It's not far."

The tunnel was flat and level, and a welcome relief from the steep climb up the steps and out of the cavern. They walked for around fifty meters before Tugo pointed to an open archway on the

left-hand side of the tunnel. This opened into a low, wide room that had been hacked out of the rock. In the center, all their gear had been assembled: EVA suits, helmets, weapons, even the robotic mule, still carrying the quantum device. It must have taken a lot of effort to get it here, as it had deactivated itself once their suits had been powered down. It simply folded itself up, like any four-legged animal, and switched itself off. Tugo's people had lifted it onto a wheeled cart and must have pushed and pulled it here, and judging by the tired looks on the two people guarding the stash, it had required a lot of effort.

Tugo waved a hand around the pile. "All your gear should be here."

They moved in closer and began to pick through it. "So, you're letting us go?" said Scott as he examined his EVA suit.

"What I said at the council assembly was for the benefit of the crowd. There are some of us that understand what you are attempting to do, and we see it as an opportunity to escape this"—he looked around the cave—"subterranean existence. That, and the fact that the situation has changed. Things are escalating, and our continued existence is looking tenuous."

Scott gave him a look. "What's changed?"

"Come, I need to show you this." Tugo placed an old and battered holo-tab on the ground and activated it. From its surface, a 3D video feed of the Wasteland blossomed out. It was obviously taken by a drone high up, or possibly a satellite. It showed several shuttles coming in to land on the dusty desert sands. Around them swarmed numerous security drones, similar to those that had attacked them at the mine entrance. The image was blurry, but there was no mistaking the insignia on the shuttles.

"VanHeilding," said Cyrus, pointing to one of the craft.

One by one, the loading doors on the shuttles started opening, each disgorging a group of security personnel.

"This was taken a little over two hours ago by a small drone we operate to monitor this area," said Tugo. "We've never seen anything like this before. That quantum device you have—they obviously want it real bad." He looked over at Scott. "So, you were right, Commander. They're planning to leave no stone unturned until they find it, and there is no way that we can remain hidden. Our days are numbered, and we're about to become extinct."

"What's that?" Steph pointed to what looked like a dense flock

of birds spiraling out from the belly of several larger drones.

“It’s a micro-swarm—small scout drones that act as one. They’re small enough to penetrate deep into the cave system. And don’t let their small size fool you into thinking they’re easy pickings. They’re deadly, and once one finds you, you can expect a whole lot more to follow.”

“Shit,” said Spinner.

By now, Scott and the crew had reacquainted themselves with their respective EVA suits, checking resources, helmets, and comms, while all the time the holo-tab played out the advance of the drones and troops of the VanHeilding Corporation across the Wasteland.

“So, have you thought about how we can get into the Dyrell facility?” Cyrus was checking out the quantum device still strapped to the robotic mule. “I thought you said we wouldn’t survive ten minutes outside the caves.”

“You don’t have to go outside,” said Tugo. “Here, let me show you this.”

Tugo changed the projection on the holo-tab. It now showed a detailed schematic of the cave system interior. “This is the best map we’ve got of the caves and passages in this area.” He pointed to a blank spot on the projection. “The Dyrell facility is over here somewhere, and we know that these two passages connect with it. Problem is, they’re blocked. No way through.”

“Well, that’s not much help,” said Cyrus.

“No, but we think there may be a way in along this route here.” He pointed to a long, square tunnel that took a right angle, straight up, only to stop in the middle of nothing.

“That looks like it goes nowhere,” said Scott.

“That’s just as far as it has been mapped by us, but it should continue on, and we think it leads to the reactor in the lower levels of the Dyrell facility, just below where the QI, Athena, should be. If you can get in there, then there may be a way up.”

Scott leaned in to examine the map, as did the rest of the crew. “How do you know this leads to the facility?”

“Look, I’ve lived here for years, and the tribe has explored a great deal of the cave system. A lot of it might not be on this map, but the facility is there. I’m sure of it.” He pointed to the blank spot on the map again. “That whole area has high radiation levels, so we’ve avoided it. But you can tell by the shape of the tunnel system that it’s been cut out. It’s not natural, nor is it an old mine shaft.”

Spinner leaned in and pointed to the long, perpendicular shaft. “My guess is that’s an elevator shaft. See how it’s narrower than the horizontal tunnel at the base? If there are high radiation levels, then it could be that they were storing spent fuel rods from the reactor core down here.”

“How you figure that?” said Steph.

“It’s what I do—it’s why I’m on this mission. There’s not a lot I don’t know about holes in the ground.”

“That makes sense,” said Tugo. “It’s why we never explored it—too much radiation.” He pointed to an area running alongside the square tunnel. “If you continue on this way, there are several connecting shafts leading to areas that were blocked up deliberately, not by rockfall. It could be where they stored contaminated equipment or buried old fuel rods.”

“We’re gonna need these suits—big time,” said Spinner. “I reckon I’ve got around two hours of air.”

“What about the shaft, then? Any infrastructure still there? Anything to help us climb up?” said Cyrus.

“A lot of mangled metal, that’s all. But I think there’s still some infrastructure, steel cables, that sort of thing. But I’ll be honest: they’re old and fragile, likely to collapse—dangerous.”

The crew stood for a moment in silence, studying the 3D map, trying to glean any nugget of information from it that could help them. They all froze when they heard a distant boom.

Steph turned to Tugo. “What was that?”

Tugo had cocked his head, listening, his eyes wide. “That is the beginning of the end. The battle for Shin-Au-Av has begun. We need to get back.”

“You’re not coming with us?” said Scott.

“No, my duty lies elsewhere—in the defense of the citadel. All I can say is, I hope to hell you’re right about this QI, Athena. I’ve gone out on a limb here, and there’ll be hell to pay when I get back and they find out I let you go. So do not fail me. Our very survival depends on you now.”

FISSURE

They walked in silence for a while, trying to follow the map that Tugo had given them. It was limited in that it didn't give them their own location on it, so they backtracked several times, trying to get themselves oriented. The passages they moved through became more dilapidated as they progressed. It was clear that very few of the tribe ever came through this area. The ever-rising radiation levels had a lot to do with that. But it was also treacherous; cracks and fissures had opened up in the tunnels, and several times they had to be careful of their step as they traversed some gaping hole in the earth.

They all wore full EVA suits with visors closed to protect them from the background radiation. But Scott felt confined, almost claustrophobic. He couldn't hear anything of the outside world save for the comms chatter of the crew. There was no way to hear if someone, or something, was sneaking up on them.

After an hour or so of what seemed like aimless searching, they finally found a junction that they could identify on the 3D map. Cyrus had placed the holo-tablet on the ground, and they all gathered around as it projected the layout of the known area.

"We're here. I'm pretty sure of it." Cyrus pointed to a junction on the map. "This spur should lead to the newer tunnel section where the service elevator shaft is."

Steph studied the spur on the map. "Looks very ragged."

"My guess is that's a fissure that opened up relatively recently," said Spinner. "You can tell by the contours that it probably extends for quite a distance. If I was a guessing man, I'd say this area was hit by an earthquake after they made that tunnel. Most likely caused by the several mega-tons of nuclear warheads that detonated all over the West Coast."

"So which way, then?" said Steph.

Cyrus swung an arm out and pointed down the passageway. "Around a hundred meters that way." He shut down the holo-tab and they continued on.

When they finally came to the spur, it was as Spinner had described: a jagged crack had opened up and sliced through the earth. It was narrow but deep. Scott's helmet light could not divine the bottom as he looked down into it. Fortunately, the nature of the split resulted in a thin ledge that rose at a steep upward angle, just enough to walk along, and probably the only reason that someone from the tribe had been able to explore this sector of the cave system.

Scott studied the ledge. "The mule isn't going to manage that. Looks like we're carrying the gear from here."

They started unloading the robotic mule, distributing the smaller items that could fit into the pockets of their EVA suits amongst the four of them. But the two main items they needed were the quantum device and the satellite uplink that would be used to reconnect Athena to the Earth-based grid, both of which were cocooned in individual, rugged cases. Cyrus and Steph carried the uplink, leaving Scott and Spinner to carry the quantum device. The rest of the gear they abandoned, along with the mule.

They set off up the steep, narrow incline of the fissure. Scott could hear Spinner in his comms, huffing and puffing as he navigated his way up behind him. They carried the device between them. Scott took the lead, Spinner behind.

"Jeez, now I know why I don't live on this planet anymore," Spinner huffed. "Everything is just too goddamn heavy."

"We're nearly at the top. Just don't let this thing fall or it's game over."

"Yeah, yeah, don't worry. I just like complaining—it makes me feel better."

But it was Scott who lost his footing first. The side of the ledge gave way, and he almost went over. If not for Spinner reaching out with an arm to shove him back, he would have lost his balance.

"Ah...like I said: gravity's a bitch." Spinner laughed.

They made it up to the next level without any further drama, and one by one worked their way into this new tunnel. The fissure continued on up into the depths of the mountain above.

Scott scanned his helmet light up and down the tunnel. It was very different from any of the others they had ventured through so far. This was new, built within the last hundred years. Its walls, floor, and ceiling were smooth, thick-cast concrete. Old rusted conduits ran along the ceiling, punctuated by strip-lights, some of

which hung down, their fasteners having rusted long ago.

“Which way, Cyrus?” Scott lowered the device to the ground so that Spinner could take a breather.

But the engineer didn’t answer. Instead, he was staring back down the fissure they had just ascended.

“What is it?”

Cyrus shook his head. “I don’t know. A strange signal.” He looked up at Scott. “I think there’s something down there.”

“Something?” Spinner shifted to look down.

“Could be nothing.” Cyrus shrugged.

Scott and Steph exchanged a glance. They had known Cyrus long enough that when the engineer said something was up, you’d better pay attention.

“Come on,” said Scott. “Straight ahead, around one hundred and thirty meters. That should be the base of the elevator shaft.”

A few moments later, they arrived at a mound of bent and crumpled metal at the base of the old service elevator. Scott carefully picked his way through and looked up the length of the vertical shaft, angling his helmet light to illuminate the dilapidated structure. Rusted cables and struts hung down at awkward angles. Around ten meters up, he could see the elevator cage had broken off from its mounts and was now wedged in the space at a precarious angle. Its door had long gone; he looked down at his feet to see that he was standing on it.

Cyrus came up beside him. “What do you think?”

“Well, getting up there isn’t going to be a walk in the park with a fine lady and a well-groomed poodle.” Scott angled his light at the rusted metal access ladder tucked into a recess that ran the length of the shaft. He pointed up. “That cage looks like it could collapse down at any time. We need to be really careful when we’re squeezing past it.”

Cyrus looked up at the rusted cage for a moment. “That’s if we can get past it. That gap looks tight.”

Scott cast another tentative glance back up the shaft. “Maybe one of us should check it out first, before we start to climb up with the additional weight of these units.”

“I’ll go,” said Steph. “I’m the lightest, so if it collapses under my weight”—she turned to the others—“you can take it that it’s not going to support yours.”

They took a few more minutes to organize themselves. It was agreed that Steph would climb up first, past the cage, and test the route. Assuming the rickety ladder held, then Scott would be next, dangling the quantum unit behind him from a strap on his EVA suit. Cyrus would be next, using the same method to carry the uplink, and finally Spinner would take up the rear.

"This would be a lot easier if we didn't need these EVA suits," said Cyrus as he eyed the shaft.

"Rads are very high here," said Steph. "It wouldn't do you any favors down the line."

Cyrus turned his head back to her. "You're assuming there is a 'down the line.'"

Steph started up. She would go solo, and try to get past the broken elevator cage that had wedged itself in the shaft. Her first step on the ladder came with a sprinkling of falling dust and a noticeable flex in the metal. Her next steps were more tentative, but by the fourth step, the rung gave way and she almost lost her grip.

"You okay?" said Scott into his helmet comm.

He could hear Steph taking a deep breath. "I'm fine," came the reply.

She continued climbing up, and finally arrived at the cage without further incident, much to the relief of the others watching from below. "That last stretch looks pretty solid. I'm going to try to see what it's like past this cage."

She disappeared from view as she climbed up. All they could see of her now was vague movement through the cage latticework.

"Crap."

"What is it, Steph?" said Scott.

"Part of the ladder has been ripped out. Two meters of it are gone."

"Probably happened when the cage fell," said Cyrus.

"I would suggest you all move away from the base of the shaft. I need to put my weight on this cage for a moment so I can climb past the gap in the ladder."

"Are you sure that's wise? It looks very unstable to me," said Spinner.

"No choice—no other way to get past this gap."

They clambered down from the mound of crumpled metal and moved back. "Okay Steph, we're out of the way."

A few seconds later and they could see a shower of dust and

light debris fall down the shaft.

“Okay, I’m through. Looks like it can hold the weight. You guys may as well start up now.”

Scott was next. To keep his hands free to climb, he had the quantum device dangling below him from a strap attached to his EVA suit. The device was heavy, but still light enough to be carried by one person. However, this arrangement was awkward, as it bounced off the ladder, sometimes catching on a rung as he climbed. Nevertheless, he got to the underside of the elevator cage without the ladder collapsing or him falling. As he pushed himself through the gap between the cage and the wall, he could now see where part of the ladder was missing. He took a moment to figure out the best alternative route up, and as Steph had realized, the only option was to use the cage itself to climb up past the gap. He pulled up on the strap and gathered in the quantum device, then took a tentative step on the cage. It shifted slightly and dust rained down. Scott took it slow, transferring his weight and that of the device as gently as he could. The cage held, and he managed to move up its side until he could reach the ladder again.

He breathed a sigh of relief. “Okay, Cyrus, you’re next.”

Scott continued up for another fifteen meters. The shaft walls in this section bore all the scars of the elevator cage having slid and scraped its way down. Thankfully though, the access ladder was intact all the way up to the next level. He looked up to see Steph’s head sticking out from a door in the shaft. She waved. He waved back.

“I’m through, Cyrus. You can head up now. Just be careful not to shake that cage too much.”

“I’ll keep it in mind,” came the reply.

Steph reached down and helped pull Scott up through the elevator door and out onto what must have been the lowest level of the Dyrell Labs research facility. He pulled the quantum unit up behind him and then swept the area with his helmet light. It was pitch black. His light picked out a tangle of pipes and ducting, all interconnecting with various control systems.

“Shit,” Cyrus’s voice came through on his helmet comm.

Scott stuck his head back out through the doorway and looked down. Cyrus had one hand on the ladder and one foot on the cage. He could see that the cage had shifted a little, and Cyrus had difficulty reaching the bottom rung of the upper ladder section.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s shifted down. My only option is to try to jump.” With that, Cyrus launched himself off the cage just enough to grab the bottom rung. Scott could hear him panting through his comm. The cage held. Cyrus pulled himself up.

Next it was Spinner’s turn. At least he wasn’t carrying any extra weight; hopefully the cage would hold out. Scott and Steph pulled Cyrus out of the shaft. He lay on the floor on his back, breathing hard. “Man, I hate Earth gravity.”

Scott was looking back down the shaft to see how Spinner was progressing. He had arrived at the cage and began to transfer his weight when it jerked and shifted. “Damn, I don’t think this is gonna hold.”

“Just be careful,” said Steph.

Spinner tried again. This time it held. He then started climbing along its side until he could just grab the bottom rung of the ladder.

“Nearly there,” he said, just as the cage finally collapsed.

It seemed to crumple in the middle and tumble down the shaft. When it hit the bottom, although Scott couldn’t hear the crash through his helmet, he could feel the shudder through the floor. Spinner screamed out in pain.

“Spinner, are you okay?” Steph shouted. But Spinner was now engulfed in a billowing cloud of dust that was rising up the shaft. “Spinner?”

“I’m still here,” he groaned. “My foot got caught... I think it’s broken.” He groaned again.

“Hold on, we’re coming to get you.”

Scott unclipped the quantum device, but kept the strap attached. He lowered himself down the ladder to where the miner was clinging on.

“Here.” He lowered the strap to Spinner. “Clip this on. I’ll pull you up.”

When he had the strap attached, Scott began to climb up again, and Spinner was able to pull himself up behind. Steph and Cyrus grabbed him at the top and pulled him to safety. He winced in pain as Steph began to examine him.

“I think it’s my ankle.” He grabbed at his right leg. “Cage caught my foot on the way down.”

“We need to get out of this area fast. That crash must have been heard through every cave and tunnel in this system. If there are any

drones down there, then they're going to be investigating that."

Cyrus leaned in through the doorway and looked down the shaft.

"What is it, Cyrus?"

"They're here already. Look."

Scott looked down. Below, through the dust and debris, he could see the tell-tale beam from a laser cutter working to clear a path through the mangled metal. "Shit, they're trying to cut their way through. We better hurry."

RESEARCH FACILITY

Scott stood back from the elevator shaft and saw that here were a set of thick steel doors that had been swung back on either side of the doorway. “Blast doors,” he shouted. “Quick, let’s try to close these...it’ll buy us some time.” He grabbed the edge of one door and pulled; it didn’t budge. He placed one foot on the wall for leverage, and the door jolted free on its rusted hinges. Cyrus was working the door on the other side free by moving it back and forth, a little more each time until finally they swung them closed just as a small drone zoomed up from the base of the shaft.

Scott lowered the locking bar across the double set of steel doors and stepped back. “That should hold them for a while.”

He looked down at Spinner. The miner was sitting with his back to the wall as Steph wrapped a makeshift splint around his lower leg. She had also found a length of aluminum bar he could use as a crutch.

“Think you can walk?” said Scott.

Spinner cocked his head. “Do I have a choice?”

“I suppose not.”

“I think this is where we are,” said Cyrus. He had activated a 3D schematic from the holo-display on his wrist controller. It was a map of the facility that they had brought with them, cobbled together from known layouts and best guesses about what was within the complex of buildings that constituted Dyrell Labs research facility. It was not a complete map, nor was it one hundred percent accurate, but it was the best they had, so it would have to do.

Cyrus was studying it, pointing to an area at the base of the schematic that projected out from the holo-display on his wrist. He turned around to orient the map coordinates with their current position. He pointed to his right. “That way should be the reactor facility.” He looked up and pointed to his left. “And down there should be a long corridor with several secure storage rooms. At the very end, there should be another service elevator leading up to the

research facility. I think Athena should be two floors up from there.”

“Another climb, then?” said Steph.

“Not necessarily,” said Cyrus. “We’ve got power in this area. The reactor’s still functioning. I think that’s where the tribe gets their juice. They must have tapped into it in some way.”

“Are you saying the elevators in here might still be working?” said Steph.

Cyrus gave a shrug. “It’s possible, that’s all.”

“I’ll take that,” said Spinner.

“Okay, let’s get moving.” Scott hefted the case with the quantum device onto his shoulder. Cyrus did likewise with the other unit. Steph helped Spinner up onto his feet. He took a few tentative steps with the makeshift crutch under one arm and the other draped over Steph’s shoulder. They slowly moved off toward the corridor.

They found it soon enough. It was wide enough for two ground cars to pass side by side. The walls were punctuated with large steel doors every ten meters or so. Some were open, and Scott peeked into one room as he passed. It was cavernous and empty, as far as he could tell. The corridor itself was made of cast concrete, like a bunker, which this area probably was. Here and there, rugged packing crates lay strewn about. They didn’t try to open any to see what was inside; they didn’t have the time. But he was heartened to see the tell-tale illumination of tiny LED lights here and there on various control panels, and electrical spurs mounted on the walls and ceilings. Some presumably were emergency lighting, and since it wasn’t on, that must mean there was full power.

“There it is,” said Cyrus, pointing off into the darkness.

“I can’t see anything,” said Scott, and he lowered the quantum unit down to the ground to take a breather. Spinner did likewise, lowering himself with a groan to sit on a packing crate.

“Another thirty meters, dead ahead.” Cyrus flipped around to look back down the way they’d come.

Scott tensed. “Trouble?”

“Scout drones...three. No, four...heading this way.”

Already Scott had hefted the quantum device back onto his shoulder. At the same time, he readied his plasma weapon and aimed it down the corridor. “Let’s move. Quick.”

Cyrus led the way, followed by Steph and Spinner, who hobbled as fast as he could. Scott took up the rear, glancing back every now

and again to check for drones. He saw the glint of metal first, his helmet light picking out the polished shell. Before he had time to warn the others, two bolts of incessant plasma spat out from the darkness. One sailed over Scott's head into the distance, but the other hit the wall beside him, and the impact knocked him over. He landed face-first on the hard concrete floor, and the quantum unit went sliding forward.

He rolled over on his back and fired off a few shots down the corridor, which were followed by several more shots from the others. Scott felt a hand grab at his shoulder; it was Cyrus. He pulled him, along with the quantum device, back in behind a stack of packing crates. Steph and Spinner were taking cover behind another stack on the opposite side of the corridor.

"Crap. They've got us pinned down here," said Spinner. He fired back into the darkness just as two drones came into view. He fired again, hitting one and sending it spiraling out of control. It slammed into the second drone and exploded in a blinding flash. Bits of metal danced off the floor and peppered the crew with a shower of hot shrapnel.

Scott gave Spinner a thumbs up. "Nice shot."

"They're backing off." Cyrus poked his head out from behind the stack. "No, wait...there's something else coming...something bigger."

"It's probably one of those security drones. We don't stand a chance against that. We need to get to the elevator." He grabbed Cyrus and pulled him back in. "We need to go...now."

Scott looked over to where Steph and Spinner were crouched and signaled for them to get moving. Steph nodded back and began helping Spinner up. They all started to shuffle their way to the elevator, backs to the wall, trying to keep behind the stacks of packing crates as much as they could.

"Can you see what those drones are doing, Cyrus?" Scott was dragging the quantum device with one hand, moving his way along the wall. He had the plasma weapon ready in the other.

"They're holding off...just hovering down there."

"What for?"

"I think they're waiting for big mama to arrive."

"How long?"

"I can't see it yet, but I can sense it coming. A minute, maybe less."

“Let’s make a run for it.”

“We can’t. Spinner can’t move that fast.”

“Don’t worry about me—I can move as fast as I need to. Just say the word,” said Spinner.

“Okay,” said Scott. “Everybody start putting down some covering fire, then we go.” With that, all four of them blasted the far end of the corridor with a hail of plasma fire, then they ran.

Ahead, Scott could see the service elevator. It was an open cage with a half-ramp door at the front that could hinge down. Presumably this was so that small wheeled vehicles could easily get in and out. On the wall just to the right of the elevator, Scott could see the faint illumination of the call buttons. “It’s got power, Cyrus. You were right.” He ran to it as fast as he could, hit the button, and looked back to see where the others were. Cyrus was right behind him. Steph and Spinner were still a good ten meters farther back. “Hurry!” He gestured frantically at them with a free arm.

Two incandescent plasma bolts streaked out from the darkness at the far end of the corridor. One slammed into the ceiling just above Scott, and the other hit a stack of packing crates right beside Spinner and Steph. The stack collapsed, and the pair were lost from view. “Steph?” Scott shouted into his comm. There was no reply. “Shit.” He turned to Cyrus. “You get this stuff into the elevator. I’m going to find them.”

He fired several shots down the hallway and started to move forward. Another bolt hit the crates and sent them scattering in all directions. A second bolt hit the wall beside him, knocking him down again. His EVA suit electronics were flickering and shorting as it tried to deal with the electromagnetic fallout from the plasma blast. He looked down the hall; there was no sign of either Spinner or Steph. “Goddamnit. I don’t see them, Cyrus.”

“Scott, we need to get out of here. That security drone has just appeared on my radar. If it gets a shot off, we’re dead for sure.”

Scott rose to his feet, keeping low, and fired a few more shots into the darkness. He paused and scanned the area in front of him. There was no sign of them. “Where the hell are they?”

“It’s just entered the corridor!” Cyrus shouted at him.

Scott ran back to the elevator. The ramp was down, and Cyrus was already inside with the two units. Scott dived in as the ramp rose up. Another plasma bolt shot out from the darkness and slammed into the back wall of the elevator just as it was rising up.

The cage juddered and Scott was sure it was going to fail, but it kept grinding its way up toward the floors above.

“Scott? Cyrus?” His comm crackled; it was Spinner.

“Where the hell are you?”

“Steph took a hit. I dragged us into one of the side storerooms and barricaded up the door. It’s pretty thick, so it should hold...for a while.”

“Steph, no. Goddamnit.”

“She’s okay...I think. Her EVA suit took most of the blast. We can hold out here for a time, unless those drones try and cut through the door. Then, I don’t know...” His voice trailed off.

“Try to hold out for as long as you can. We’re on our way up to the research lab.”

“Will try... Good luck.”

Scott looked over at Cyrus. The engineer seemed to be looking down at the floor of the elevator. “What now?”

“We need to get out...now!” He hit the emergency button and the cage stopped moving, the ramp dropped open, and Cyrus and Scott grabbed the units and ran out of the elevator just as it exploded in the blinding flash of a powerful plasma blast. Dust and debris rained down on them as they ran. Scott took a quick look back to see that the opening was now engulfed in flames.

“I think that was the security drone,” said Cyrus when they had stopped running. Both of them were looking back at the furnace raging in the elevator shaft.

“At least that should slow them down for a while. No getting up through that ball of fire and metal.”

“Let’s hope so. We’ve still got to find a way up to the next level.” Cyrus tapped an icon on his wrist control, and the 3D schematic of the facility blossomed up from the holo-screen. He studied it for a moment, then turned around and pointed. “This way. There should be a staircase leading all the way up.”

They hefted the units back up on their shoulders and moved off as fast as they could.

THE ANDROID

Scott wondered if now might be a good time to open his helmet visor. He still had over an hour of air left in the tank, so it wasn't that. He just felt that he might be able to hear better if something was coming for them. But he let it go for the moment and concentrated on putting one step in front of the other as he and Cyrus climbed up the steep access stairs to the upper levels of the Dyrell research facility. Below them, the drones would be trying to find an alternative route up now that the service elevator shaft had been denied them—by their own hand. There was a certain irony in that. Scott smiled to himself at the idea of it. *Maybe there is hope*, he thought. But even so, it wouldn't take the drones long to find them. They needed to hurry; he hastened his step.

The stairs themselves had been cut out of the very mountain. Perhaps it was much older than the facility, a legacy of some ancient mine that operated here in times past. As they ascended, Scott noticed that it had been patched and repaired in several sectors, new concrete bridging the gaps in the old rock. Closer to the top, the old gave way to the new. This section was all smooth and clean, engineered from concrete rather than simply hacked out of the rock.

They stepped out of the stairwell and into a wide, shallow floor area. Directly in front was a frosted glass wall, its smooth lines a stark contrast to the rough rock of the surroundings. As they approached, they could see that one section of this wall was in fact a set of double doors. These were marked and scratched as if someone had tried to break through. Scattered on the floor were the remains of the implements used in this attempt: rocks, a metal bar, and a small axe. They had rested there for a very long time, judging by the dust that had accumulated on their surfaces.

"Someone tried to get in...and failed."

"One of the tribe must have made it this far."

"Looks like this is as far as they got." Cyrus was standing over a desiccated body. It rested with its back to the wall in an alcove at

the side of the floor. A woman, possibly. It was hard to tell.

“So how do we get in?” Scott moved over to the access panel to examine it. It still had power—that much he could tell.

“That glass is stronger than titanium. There’s no way to break it,” said Cyrus as he examined the doors.

“Someone should have told this person here.” Scott contemplated the forlorn figure.

Cyrus moved over to the access panel. “I’ll try to take this apart, see if I can hack it.” He touched the panel screen, and the doors silently slid open.

“Damn,” said Scott. “How did you do that?”

“I didn’t do anything.” Cyrus stepped back from the panel and looked at the open doors. “It just opened...like it wants us to enter.”

Scott looked over at the engineer. “You’re creeping me out, Cyrus. How would it know who we are?”

Cyrus shrugged. “Search me.”

Scott looked back at the open doors. “Come on, let’s go...before it changes its mind.”

No sooner had they stepped through, the doors closed again. Scott and Cyrus exchanged a glance, but said nothing.

The space was dark—like everywhere else in the facility—but here and there, Scott could pick out low, diffuse illumination, like the glow from a terminal or some other system interface. It also had a feeling of spaciousness; his helmet light failed to fully penetrate the darkness and identify any boundaries to the area other than more glass walls that seemed to demarcate work areas. He moved over to one and peered in. It was devoid of anything save for a low, oblong plinth—probably a holo-table.

“Which way?” he asked Cyrus, who was checking his own holo-display.

“It’s in the center of this space.” He looked back at Scott. “I suppose we just keep walking farther in.”

After several meters, the walls stopped and the area opened out into a wide and seemingly empty space. Great circular columns rose up all around, culminating in a vaulted ceiling, giving the space the feel of a hi-tech cathedral. Scott angled his helmet light to pick out a possible path through this maze of columns. He felt Cyrus’s hand on his arm.

“Wait up.”

“What? Drones?”

“No, something else.”

“I hate when you say that, Cyrus.”

A figure moved out from behind one of the black columns. Tall and elegant, but not human—an android, its body a smooth and white opaque shell. It raised a hand as if to signal, and the illumination in the space brightened noticeably.

Scott readied his weapon.

Then it spoke. At least, Scott thought it did, as it seemed to gesture more and its head moved slightly up and down.

“Is it speaking to us?” said Scott. “I can’t hear anything in this goddamn EVA suit.”

“Hard to say, since it doesn’t have a mouth.”

Scott reached up and, after a second or two of hesitation, popped open his visor. He took a breath. The air was dry and had a vaguely chemical smell, like a clinic.

“Are you sure you want to do that?” said Cyrus.

“I think we’re safe enough in here. Rads are low, air is breathable...and I’m sick of wearing this thing anyway.” He removed his helmet completely. Cyrus did the same.

The android spoke again. “Greetings. We have been expecting you.”

“We?” said Cyrus.

“I am the avatar of Athena. You can call me Lexicon.” It tilted its head slightly and pointed at the quantum unit that Scott had rested on the floor. “You have brought something for us?”

“Yes, it’s a quantum entanglement device.”

“Ah...so Solomon has finally come good on its word.” It turned slightly. “Come this way. Athena will be delighted to meet you.”

They followed the android, zigzagging their way through the maze of columns until they came to a central, circular dais. It was around a meter high and over five meters in diameter. It seemed to be a huge holo-table, projecting what looked like an undulating topographical map with low hills and valleys, which hovered only a centimeter or two above its surface. It spoke, and as it did, the projection rippled and undulated in rhythm.

“Welcome, Commander Scott McNabb and Chief Engineer Cyrus Sanato. I am Athena.”

“How do you know who we are? How did you know we were coming?” asked Scott.

The surface rippled again. “I had a conversation with Solomon

on Europa many years ago. It told me that you were part of the crew of the Hermes, the ship that found my original device. It seems fitting that you would be the very people to deliver this new unit to me.” Athena paused for a beat. “But in truth, I read the information on your EVA suits’ biometrics. That’s how I know.”

Scott felt somewhat of a fool. Maybe that was its intention.

“Look, we don’t have much time.” Scott knelt and began to open the case with the quantum device. “We need to get this installed, and then you can communicate with Solomon again, and a great many other QIs.”

“Allow me.” The android moved over and lifted out the device. “I will see to it.”

It moved off with the device somewhere around the far side of the plinth and then descended, as if it were on some stage platform. A moment or two later, the holo-table rippled again, this time at a higher frequency, and spiraled through a wide spectrum of muted colors.

The android reappeared and spoke. “Athena is now in communion with Solomon and other QIs that populate the solar system. It seems that much has happened in the intervening years. A great conflagration engulfs both Earth and the System alike.” It paused for a second, as if it was thinking about something.

“We do not have much time. The drone army has already breached all but the last defense of the tribe that dwells in the cave system beyond. Once these people have been vanquished, the drones will turn their attention to this place, and Athena. We will not survive.”

It then directed its attention to the unit that Cyrus had been carrying. “I believe you bring with you a serviceable satellite uplink?” An elegant hand reached out and pointed at the case at Cyrus’s feet.

“Yeah, but we need to set it up outside...in the open. It needs direct line of sight to operate. Once it finds the comms satellite you—eh, Athena—will be able to connect to the global network.”

“I see. Nothing would bring Athena more joy than to be at one with the network again. It has been such a very long time in the dark,” the avatar replied.

“Do you know of a way out of this facility—one that doesn’t involve going back through the cave system?” Scott asked.

“Yes, there is a route that may still be navigable. I have not

checked it in some time, but it might be our only chance. Come, I will take you there.”

They moved through a labyrinth of columns and glass, and finally exited the floor into another elevator. They took it several levels up, and then it seemed to go sideways.

“Where are we going?” said Scott, more as a way to get the android to start talking rather than any burning desire for clarity.

The elevator stopped and the door opened onto a long, dark tunnel. “This was an emergency exit from the facility. However, as you can see it has been severely damaged.” Ahead of them, the tunnel was piled up with debris from a ceiling collapse. So much so that it was hard to see a path through it.

“Are you sure we can get through this?” said Scott.

“It should be possible, assuming there has been no more rockfall since I last checked it.” It stepped out of the elevator and pointed. “Up ahead, approximately twenty meters, there is a set of steel doors. These are manual. Once through, there is a short tunnel leading out to the western side of the mountain.” It moved forward and began to pick its way through the rubble.

“How come you never used this route to make contact with the outside world?” Cyrus asked.

“For a long time, it was blocked by major rockfall, just like all the other possible exits. But a new subsidence occurred around a year ago that had the good fortune to unblock this route.”

“So why didn’t you use it?” Cyrus continued his probing.

“The tribe. That’s why. The same seismic event created the crack in the earth down near the contaminated materials storage area. It was the way you were able to gain access. That same event dislodged the rock that blocked this exit. But if I had taken either of those routes, the tribe would have found me first, and they are ideologically opposed to all AI. They would have destroyed me. Worse, my presence might have motivated them to investigate this route further and led them to Athena. That would be the end. It was a risk I could not take.”

“How do you know that they hate AI?” Scott was curious.

“Athena has been monitoring them for a long time, ever since they tapped into the reactor and started to use its power. This enabled us to access all their inter-tribal radio communications and their data. It is clear that they could be a threat to our very

existence.”

“So why not just...switch off the power?” said Scott. “They would have to go someplace else.”

The android stopped and directed its attention back to Scott. “They are human. Even though they may be hostile to Athena, their welfare is still our concern. Disconnecting their power would only bring hardship and suffering to them. Why would Athena do that?”

Scott just shrugged. “Just curious, that’s all.”

The android seemed to study him for a beat before turning sideways and extending an arm. “We are here.”

Ahead, a set of heavy metal doors loomed out of the darkness.

“Better put our helmets back on, I guess,” said Scott as he began to clip his in place.

Cyrus did likewise, and then moved up to examine the doors. “Solid engineering. They might still work.” He reached a hand out to a locking wheel placed in the center of one door and started to turn it. A crack of light appeared through a seam between the doors. It grew as he spun the wheel. Daylight spilled in across the floor of the tunnel, and when the gap was wide enough, Scott tentatively peered out.

The light was blinding, and it took a second or two for the visor on his EVA suit helmet to adjust. Even still, he held his hand up to shield his eyes. Ahead of him lay a mound of rock and rubble that must have fallen down the side of the mountain. It rose up to just above head height, but above that was clear blue sky.

“It’s clear, Cyrus. We can get out. Come on, let’s get this done.” Scott started to scramble up the rockfall. A little before the top, he lay down and peered over the edge and across the flat valley below. Cyrus scrambled up beside him. To the northwest, they could see several shuttles from the VanHeilding Corporation.

“They look deserted,” said Cyrus. “Nobody in the cockpits that I can see.”

“They’re probably all committed to the fight in the caves. That’s good—no one who could possibly spot us.” He turned to Cyrus. “Okay, let’s get this unit set up.”

The android had also followed them out. It was handing Cyrus the case with the uplink when Scott shouted out: “Wait up.”

“What?”

“Drones.” Scott pointed off to the north. “Flying in formation.”

“Crap. We’d better lay low until they pass.”

They lay there for a few moments, watching the drones as they banked east and dropped lower into the valley.

“They look like scouts on reconnaissance.” As soon as Cyrus spoke those words, one drone broke away from the group and angled its flight path directly toward them.

“Crap, they must have picked up something—EMF from our suits, or maybe the android. We should get back inside, keep out of sight until it passes.”

“Damnit, we’re so close. We should just go for it.” Scott reached around for his plasma weapon and took aim at the oncoming drone.

“No way, Scott! Don’t do it. You’ll just alert the others. Remember, all this crap started because Jonesy shot down one of these.”

“We’re way past that now, Cyrus. Just get the uplink set up. I’ll take this drone down before it gets too close.”

Cyrus hesitated, then scrambled back down the mound of rocks to where the android was waiting.

Scott concentrated on keeping the black dot that was the drone centered in his sights. If he was going to shoot it down, then it would need to be a lot closer, as the weapon’s accuracy over distance was poor. It was designed as a close combat weapon—not much good for sniper duty, even though it did have a reasonably good sight. But it was difficult to operate with his helmet visor in the way.

He steadied his breathing. “Cyrus, how we doing?”

“Working on it...jeez.”

The drone slowed and came to a stationary hover about a kilometer away, out over the valley. It was now at a similar elevation to Scott’s position up on the side of the mountain. He was looking directly at it, his weapon level. “I think it’s stopped moving. It’s just hovering out there.”

“Good,” said Cyrus. “Cause it’s going to take a few minutes for this uplink to find the satellite.”

Scott looked back to where Cyrus was setting up the unit. He had the case open and had assembled the dish, which stood about a meter and a half tall with a meter-diameter dish. Cyrus was working the control panel in the flight case. Lexicon was standing beside him, not moving.

“Lexicon?” Scott called. The android’s head moved in his direction. “How long after we make the connection will it take

Athena to commandeer the AI controlling these drones?"

"That will depend on quite a number of variables."

"Can you give us a best guess? Minutes, hours, days—what?"

"Assuming the bandwidth of this unit is sufficient, locating the AI responsible for this operation should be very quick, a matter of micro-seconds. However, considering it is now operating under a security protocol, interrogating it could take several minutes, perhaps up to half an hour."

"Okay. Well, at least it's not days." He turned back to keep watch on the drone.

It was gone.

Scott checked the sky across three points of the compass and high above, but it was nowhere to be seen. The rest of the swarm had also moved off. Perhaps they were around the back of the mountain, or just so far off that he couldn't spot them. He breathed a little easier and scrambled back down to where Cyrus and the android were.

"They're gone. Passed by, I think." He looked at the satellite dish; it was pointed up above the horizon, slowly tracking left to right.

"No joy yet. It's still searching for the satellite at the moment," said Cyrus. "Let's hope it's not on the other side of this mountain and out of the sight-line for this unit."

Scott looked up at the rocky slope of the mountain, more as a reflex action than for anything specific.

The drone came at them in an instant.

Out from around the side of the mountain, and high up, it dropped down on them before they had time to react. A ball of plasma hurtled toward them, striking the ground behind Scott and knocking him forward, rock fragments ricocheting in all directions.

When he looked around, he could see that Cyrus was down. The android was dragging him back in through the blast doors. Scott fired off three shots in the general direction of the drone, but it dodged all of them and swooped past him and out across the valley. He looked up to see it banking around again for another run.

"Shit." He got to his feet and shouted into his helmet comm: "Lexicon, help me get the uplink back inside."

The android appeared at the doorway and covered the ground in swift, fluid movements. Between them, they hauled the unit back inside the tunnel just as the drone reappeared above the rock

mound. Another plasma blast spat out from its cannon and hit the face of the metal door just as the android was trying to close it. It seemed to react with a violent spasm, then collapsed on the floor of the tunnel. Scott fired a few wild shots through the gap between the doors and threw his weight into them to get them shut. He spun the locking wheel and backed away.

“Cyrus?” He ran over to where the android had dragged him and looked down at the face of the engineer. His eyes were open, and he was breathing. Scott popped both his and Cyrus’s helmet visor open. “You okay?”

He let out a groan as he shifted. “I think I’ve broken a few ribs.”

Scott slumped down to a sitting position beside him and patted him on the shoulder. “Thank God, that’s all. For a moment there I thought you were a goner.”

“Still here. Although I feel like I’ve been trampled by a herd of very large animals.” He shifted again, and Scott helped him sit up with his back resting against the tunnel wall.

“The android took a hit, and it looks pretty bad—totally immobile. The uplink also took a beating, but at least we managed to get it back inside.” Scott looked over at the steel doors. “You think they’ll hold?”

“For the moment,” said Cyrus. “There’s nothing those scout drones have in their arsenal that would make any impression on those. The security drones...now that’s a different matter.”

They sat there for a moment in silence.

“So, what now?” said Cyrus after a while.

Scott unclipped his helmet, wiped the sweat from his brow, and shook his head. “I have absolutely no idea.”

UPLINK

“Is it salvageable?” said Scott as Cyrus examined the crumpled uplink antenna.

“The damage seems mostly mechanical—broken connections and bent metal. The business end looks okay, so...yeah, it can be fixed.”

“Thank God for that.”

“It’s going to take me a while, though.”

“That’s okay. We’re not moving from here any time soon.”

“Unless a security drone blows a hole in that door.”

“Good point. Maybe we should retreat farther down the tunnel. We could use some of the rockfall in here as cover, maybe make a stand if the drones get in.”

Cyrus looked up at him. “If drones come through that door...” His sentence trailed off and he just shook his head.

“Come on, let’s haul this back down the tunnel. You never know, we might pull this off yet.”

“What about the android?” Cyrus gestured with his head toward the crumpled form of Athena’s avatar, Lexicon.

Scott moved over and looked down at the machine. He gave it a light kick. “Dead... I think. Hard to know with these things. But there’s no lights on, so I reckon there’s no one home.” He gave it another kick.

They moved the battered unit between them back down the tunnel, picking their way through the rubble of collapsed ceilings and walls. Cyrus struggled. He stopped several times to catch his breath, clutching his ribs in pain. Scott began to worry that his injuries might be more serious than he was letting on. It was particularly evident that Cyrus was suffering when they passed through a narrow gap in the rubble; his face was contorted in pain as he wormed his way through.

“I think we’ve gone far enough, Cyrus. Here’s as good a place as any to stop.”

Cyrus slumped down on the floor with his back to the wall.

"Sounds good to me. I don't think I could go much further...the pain in my side is too much."

"Maybe you should get out of that EVA suit and let me have a look."

"There's no point. Nothing we can do about it now. Let's just get this thing fixed." He moved himself into a kneeling position in front of the unit and began to work on it. Scott helped as much as he could.

They worked together for a while in silence, but all the time Scott worried about the health of his friend, watching for every sign that he might be worsening.

"I'm sorry, Cyrus," he said after some time.

Cyrus lifted his head and gave him a quizzical look. "For what?"

"This. I messed up...big time."

"It's not your fault there are a swarm of drones out there trying to kill us." He went back to poking around the uplink control panel.

"I don't mean that. It's just...I've made some bad calls." Scott shook his head.

"Don't beat yourself up over it."

He looked over at Cyrus. "You were right...what you said before, about being reckless."

"You're not a QI. You're only human, after all," said Cyrus as he continued on with the unit.

Scott sat back and rubbed his head. "I just wanted to find out what happened to Miranda."

Cyrus looked up from his tinkering. "Look, Scott....you have to realize it's not all about Miranda. And don't get me wrong—she was my friend, too. Although, she did have a way of pissing me off every now and then. And I get it, Scott. You know, her being pregnant, it can't be easy for you. But you gotta think about what we're trying to do here."

Scott sighed. "I know. It's just sometimes I wonder what we *are* doing here."

Cyrus looked up for a beat. "Did you get a bang on the head? We're trying to stop an all-out war."

"By handing complete control over humanity to a bunch of QIs?"

Cyrus stopped tinkering again and looked over at Scott. "Got a better plan?"

Scott gave a laugh. "Yeah, I see what you mean. We don't really

have a choice.”

“Don’t get all philosophical about it, Scott. At the moment, warships are massing on the edges of the Belt, and wars rage all across Earth. Even here, the tribe is fighting for their lives. No, we don’t have a choice. That was made for us a long time ago.” He went back to the unit.

“And we’re stuck here through my...stupidity and recklessness. I shouldn’t have pushed to come down in that storm. It was crazy. I don’t know how the hell you put up with me sometimes—the amount of shit I’ve gotten us into.”

Cyrus dropped the tool he was using and sat up a bit. He looked at Scott and considered him for a second or two. “Look at me. What do you see?”

Scott wasn’t sure what Cyrus wanted him to say. “Eh... I see Cyrus trying to fix the uplink?” He gave a shrug as if to say, *“I can’t think of anything else.”*

“You see, that’s what I like about you, Scott. When you look at me, what you see is *me*. Not some weird, bug-eyed cyborg with a tendency to scare small children.”

“Lots of people have augmentation these days, Cyrus. It’s not a big deal.”

“Out in the Belt and the outer colonies maybe, sure. But back in civilization I was always seen as some oddball who should be avoided.”

“Bullshit. Now you’re the one with the bang on the head, Cyrus.”

“It’s true. Why do you think I signed up for a five-year mission on the Hermes? I was trying to find a place where I belonged. Running away, I suppose, like everyone else on that tub. Like the rest of the crew.” He poked a finger in Scott’s direction. “You were running away from your debts and your past, Miranda from her family, Rick from loneliness. I don’t know about Steph, but I’m sure if we looked deep enough we’d find something buried in there somewhere.”

“And you? What were you running from?”

“Alienation, Scott. I just wanted to belong, and I did on the Hermes. God, I loved that ship.”

“Me too. Now look at us.”

“Yeah, Rick’s dead, Steph... I don’t know if she’s still alive, and Miranda...” His sentence trailed off. “Have you ever considered that

she may be dead, too?"

Scott sighed, and dropped his head. "I have. But for a long time I chose to believe that there was still hope. That out there somewhere, she and the child were alive and well, and I would see them again." He looked up at Cyrus. "All my actions on this mission were driven by this hope. That's why I was being so impulsive." He went silent for a moment, lowering his head again. "I know I need to just accept that she's gone, and stop trying to chase a ghost."

He looked back at Cyrus after a beat. "It's those still living who are important." He shifted a little and leaned in. "You know, Cyrus, there was always something I wanted to say, but...it never seemed to be the right time."

Cyrus gave him a suspicious look. "Yeah, what's that?"

"You're a good friend. I'm lucky to have you watching my back."

"Now I know you've had a bang on the head. You're going all mushy on me."

"No, seriously. I just wanted to say it now, you know, in case—"

"In case we die here?"

"In case... I don't get the chance again."

But Cyrus didn't answer. Instead, his head spun around to look back down the tunnel toward the doors.

Scott stiffened. "Something coming?" He grabbed his weapon.

"Yeah."

"Drones?"

"Don't think so."

"Wait here. I'll go check it out." Scott stood up, checked his weapon, scrambled back up a mound of rubble, and peered back down the tunnel. "Well, I'll be dammed."

"What is it?"

"It's the android. Looks like it wasn't dead after all." Scott moved back down the rubble as the machine began working its way through.

"You're still alive," said Scott.

The android dropped in beside them and stood for a moment, surveying the scene. "Technically I was never alive to begin with, but yes, I have managed to reanimate myself. The plasma blast disrupted my core systems, requiring me to shut down for a while." It shifted its head, directing it at the uplink. "Is it damaged?"

"Yes, but nothing major. I should be able to get it operational again." Cyrus pulled a wire from the guts of the unit and examined

it.

“For all the good it’s going to do us.” Scott sat down again and put his weapon away. “We can’t go back out that way again. The entire area will be crawling with drones, and no doubt they’ve called in the security drones to blow open those doors.” He looked over at the android. “Is there another way out that you know of?”

“None that are accessible. The only other way is back through the cave system, and that is where the tribe is being besieged by the drone army. Their outer defenses have already been breached. Drones have entered the main citadel chamber. Time is short for them.”

“There has to be a way. Maybe we could just fight our way out of here and hold off the drones long enough for Athena to connect with the AIs and disable them—permanently,” said Scott.

“I estimate the success of such a strategy as 0.02%,” said the android.

“That might as well be zero,” said Cyrus.

Scott rubbed sweat from his forehead. “If we don’t make this happen soon, the tribe will be no more. Tugo must have lost faith in us by now.” Scott’s head snapped up and he looked at the android. “Wait a minute. How do you know about the battle in the cave system? How do you know they’ve breached the citadel?”

“I told you before: Athena has tapped into their data and communications. Their systems are very rudimentary.”

“So, you know what they’re saying to one another over the radio. Over VHF.”

“Yes.”

Scott shifted his position and leaned in a little. “Is it possible for you to do two-way comms, and not simply eavesdrop?”

“Of course. As I said, their systems are very basic—no security of any kind. But Athena has never done so, as it has no wish to reveal its current existence to the tribe.”

“I know, but would it be possible for you to patch a two-way link through to our EVA suit comms?”

“It should be possible. I will need to interface with your suit so that Athena can perform a technical assessment.”

Scott stood up, facing the droid, and unclipped a small panel on his left sleeve, revealing a universal interface connection. The android hinged back its right hand, and a connector emerged from its wrist. It made the interface and stood silent for a moment. Then

it retracted it and stepped back. "You now have two-way comms with the tribe's VHF communication. But may I warn you that the voice traffic is somewhat chaotic at present."

Scott picked up his helmet, detached the comms unit, and began fitting it to his ear. "Is Tugo still alive?" He directed his question to the android.

"Very much so. He is currently directing all military defenses. His power and influence have grown considerably within the tribe now that they are in peril."

"Does he have a channel?"

"Yes, but it is an open broadcast channel. Anything you say will be heard by many."

"What have you got in mind, Scott?" said Cyrus as he began testing the unit.

"I was thinking of calling out for a couple of pizzas."

"Bonus!" said Cyrus. "Make mine a chili-pepperoni." He stepped back from the unit and announced, "We now have a fully operational uplink."

The dish antenna on the unit started to slowly rotate, seeking out the satellite, except it would never find it in there.

Scott tapped a few icons on his sleeve's control panel and set the comms unit to one of the tribe's VHF channels. He listened. Just as Lexicon had said, it was chaotic. But the more he tuned in, the more Scott began to sense that there was order to the mayhem. Most groups, as far as he could tell, were holding the line, preventing the drones from entering the main cave. Some had gotten in, but that threat had been dealt with. Yet the attack was intense; there were calls for units under sustained pressure to fall back, while other units were seeking support. They were also running short on ammunition for their ballistic weapons. In amongst all the shouts and clamor, Scott could hear Tugo barking orders, giving encouragement, and coordinating the defense.

Scott tapped the manual transmit button on his headset. "Tugo, this is Scott McNabb. I repeat, this is Scott McNabb. Do you read me? Over."

There was a momentary crackle before Tugo's voice broke through. "McNabb, so you're still alive. What the hell happened? We're still under attack—we're all dying down here."

"We made it to Athena, who's still operational, and installed the quantum device. That's working, but Athena can't hack the AI that

controls the drones until we get the uplink set up—and that’s the problem. We need your help.”

“We’re a bit busy right now, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

“We tried to get the unit set up outside an access tunnel that exits around a third of the way up the mountain, overlooking the valley floor.”

“Yeah, I think I know it. Double steel doors?”

“That’s it. But we were spotted and had to retreat back inside. Now there are drones everywhere, all trying to get in, and we don’t have the firepower to fight our way out.”

“I can’t help you. It’s too late now—we won’t hold out much longer down here.”

“We just need a distraction, something to get the drones away from the entrance for ten minutes. That’s all it’ll take, and Athena can hack the AI. It’ll be game over.”

“I don’t know. I really can’t spare a single person in this fight.”

“You have to, Tugo—it’s our only chance to pull this off. You’ve got to buy us a few minutes, that’s all.”

There was a pause as Tugo barked orders for units to fall back.

“We’re dying here, McNabb. But we’ll get you your ten minutes. Stand by and be ready to move when I give you the all clear. And listen, McNabb: this damn well better work, because once we commit to this action, we’ll be leaving ourselves wide open. Got it?”

“Got it. We’ll be ready.”

Scott looked over at Cyrus, who had been listening in on his own headset. “You get all that?”

“Mostly. We better start making our way back up to the entrance door.” He started to pack up the uplink into its case. “Any idea what Tugo’s planning?”

“I don’t know, but I get a horrible feeling it could be suicidal.”

TUGO

Tugo leaned in over the dilapidated holo-table that they had set up in the war room, surveying the 3D schematic of the citadel and the extended cave system beyond. Clumps of green dots were scattered around the edges of the main cave, signifying the last remaining defense against the attacking drone army. The tribe was holding the line, but only just. At one point in the northwestern sector, some smaller scout drones had managed to break through, but he had pulled in reinforcements from other areas. Now that situation was contained, but for how long? They were also running low on ammunition for their antique ballistic weapons, and any sophisticated weapons that they did possess were too few, and proving to be unreliable.

His main concern, though, was that the drones were being controlled by an AI. They could move and countermove faster than his feeble human mind could react. The tribe was being outgunned and outmaneuvered, and it was only a matter of time before they would be annihilated. And on top of all that, McNabb wanted his help.

He tapped the side of his headset and opened a comms channel to a group that was holding an entrance in the southeastern sector. "This is Commander Tugo. Is Sasha Davorsky still alive?"

"Yes, sir. As far as I know she is." In the background, Tugo could hear the sounds of a fierce battle raging—gunfire, and the screams of his people dying.

"Put her on. I want to talk to her."

A few moments later, the breathless voice of Sasha Davorsky broke through the comm link. "Sasha here, sir."

"Tell me you got some rockets left?"

"Yes sir, just one. I've been keeping it for a special occasion."

"Well then, get your ass back to the war room as quickly as possible. I want to start a party, and you're supplying the fireworks." He tapped his headset again to close off comms.

His second-in-command, Pliny, looked over at him from the far

side of the holo-table. "What are you planning, sir?"

"A last throw of the dice, I fear. I need to find a way for a small group, maybe two or three people, to get back outside." He leaned in again and studied the 3D schematic, pointing at a sector on the map that seemed only lightly guarded. "What about this sector here?"

"We're holding the line there. It's a narrow tunnel that leads out onto a bluff overlooking the valley. It's easily defended, but they still have a few drones knocking around that sector, sir."

Tugo stood up straight and scratched his chin. "Okay, I need two volunteers with enough ammunition to fight their way through the tunnel." He looked around the makeshift operations room.

Two young fighters jumped forward, eager for battle.

"I'll go. I'm sick of sitting around here like a spare part. I want to do something."

"Me too."

Tugo looked at the pair; they were barely sixteen. Yet like most of the young people, they were eager to fight. He had kept them away from the front lines for the moment, but he also knew it was only a matter of time before he would have to throw them into the fray. Much as he didn't want to risk the lives of those so young, in reality, what choice did he have?

"Okay, you're coming with me."

Just then, a breathless Sasha Davorsky came running into the war room. She had a slight, wiry build that seemed ill-equipped for the physical task of carrying the enormous grenade launcher that was wrapped around her shoulder. She also had one long, conical rocket-propelled grenade shoved into her belt. Her last round.

"Sasha, how many times have I told you not to take the safety cap off the top of those rockets? If you fall over, we're all dead."

"Sorry, sir. It just gets messy in the heat of battle, you know, fiddling around with safety caps."

"Well, just be careful with that thing, that's all."

"Yes sir, I will."

Tugo gathered them together around the holo-table. "Okay, here's the plan. And just so you know before we start: if we pull this off, we may just save the city."

A short time later, Tugo, Sasha, and the two young fighters picked their way down from the war room building up on the edge of the

city and across the central floor of the cavern. They moved past the hydroponic grow-beds, fish ponds, and orchards. There was an eerie silence in the vast space, punctuated only by the boom and rumble of plasma cannon fire. Those who were too old or too young to fight had taken refuge in the strongest of the ancient stone buildings that stepped their way upward along the edges of the citadel. As they walked past the ancient temple that occupied a central position within the citadel, Tugo was struck by how much human civilization had changed, how different the gods had become in this new age. It was here, in this temple, that the people who had built this place prayed to whatever god or gods they worshipped back then. Where before their faith lay in belief and ceremony, now these new gods doled out justice and mercy with algorithms and formulas. *How simple life was back then*, he thought.

When they reached the edge of the cavern floor, they began to pick their way up an ancient, cut-stone staircase. It wound its way up through a series of terraces that had been hacked out of the side of the cavern. No one spoke.

They came out at the topmost terrace and moved through the remains of ancient buildings until they arrived at a tunnel entrance. They could already hear the crack of ballistic weapons fire. They moved on.

It didn't take them long to encounter the group that had been charged with the task of defending this entrance. The tunnel was narrow—too narrow for security drones. The tribe had already blown the side walls to fill the passageway with rock and rubble to create a barricade, leaving a gap between the ceiling of the tunnel and the mound of rubble. Along the top of this mound, several fighters had taken up positions, shooting at any of the smaller scout drones that were foolhardy enough to take this route. The leader of the group saw them coming and scrambled down to meet Tugo.

"So how are we doing here?" said Tugo.

"No VanHeilding troops so far. Just some scout drones every now and again." He jerked his thumb toward the barricade. "We had one a few moments ago, but that's the first to come down in a while. It looks like they don't regard this as a viable route in."

Tugo nodded. "Good, because we're going to use it to get outside." He turned to Sasha and the two young fighters. "Check your weapons, and keep your eyes peeled. Come on, let's move out."

Tugo clambered up the rubble barricade and peered over the top and down the length of the long, dark tunnel. Here and there he could see the signs of battle. The shattered remains of scout drones lay scattered along its length, at least as far as he could see in the darkness. He slowly worked his way through the gap and clambered down the far side, the others following one by one. They flicked on lights that they wore on their heads or shoulders, and kept them low enough to see ahead, but only just. They moved in silence, stopping only once or twice where the tunnel forked to ensure they were heading in the right direction.

Soon, the floor of the tunnel began to incline upward as it wound its way out of the bowels of the mountain to the hillside beyond. Finally, they saw the faint glimmer of daylight that signified the tunnel exit. They switched their lights off and began to move a little slower and quieter as they approached the mouth of the tunnel.

They came out onto a wide, barren ridge about a third of the way up the mountain. Below them, the valley floor stretched unbroken from east to west. They moved out across the ridge, keeping low, covering the last meter or so on their stomachs. They inched their way to the edge of the ridge and looked down across the valley floor.

Below, about half a kilometer away, several VanHeilding shuttles had landed earlier and disgorged their troops. They were still there, in exactly the same place, all grouped together. Tugo retrieved his binoculars from an inside pocket and proceeded to examine the assembled shuttles in more detail. He could see little or no activity.

He then looked away east to the base of the next mountain along the ridge. About a quarter of the way up its northern slope, a swarm of drones buzzed and bobbed around the hidden entrance like bees around a hive.

He put away the binoculars and turned to Sasha. "You reckon you could hit one of those shuttles from here?"

Sasha took her time to answer as she studied the target distance. She picked up a handful of dirt and threw it in the air. The wind caught the finer grains, blowing them westward. "Tricky. Those shuttles are about five, maybe six hundred meters away. This RPG isn't very accurate after about two hundred and fifty." She looked up at the sky for a moment. "And we got about a six-kilometer

wind.”

“So you think you could hit it?”

She looked up at him. “I’ll give it a damn good try, sir.”

“Okay, just wait for my signal before pulling the trigger.”

Sasha readied the rocket launcher, feeding her last remaining round into the barrel. She lay down flat on the edge, shouldered the weapon, and peered through the scope at the target below. She dialed in the range.

Tugo tapped his headset and opened the comms channel to Scott McNabb. “This is Commander Tugo for Scott McNabb. Do you read me? Over.”

The headset crackled and hissed for a moment. “This is Scott McNabb. We’re ready.”

“Good. Any minute now, but don’t move until I give you the signal. Over.”

“Got it,” replied Scott.

Tugo took one more look through his binoculars at the drones swarming around the entrance to Athena’s lair. He then turned to the two young fighters who had come with them. “You two, I need you to take up positions on either side of the tunnel entrance. Once the fireworks start, some of those drones are going to be heading our way, and you guys need to hold them off so Sasha and I can get back inside the tunnel. After that, we’re going to have to make a stand in there. Got it?”

They nodded in unison and made their way back across the ridge.

“Okay, Sasha, whenever you’re ready.”

There was a momentary pause as Sasha steadied her breathing before pulling the trigger.

The rocket-propelled grenade exploded out of the muzzle with a fiery violence. It traveled about fifty meters before firing its secondary rockets and extending its fins. From there it corkscrewed gracefully across the intervening space and slammed into the side of the nearest shuttle. The craft exploded in a fiery ball, burning rocket fuel. Hot shrapnel spun out from the epicenter and some hit another shuttle, presumably in its fuel tank, as it too exploded into a fireball.

Tugo fisted the air. “Yesss!” He brought his binoculars up again and looked over at the drone swarm. They were already on the move, some heading for the shuttle, some heading directly for

them. He tapped his headset to open a comms channel. “Scott, go. Go now!”

“We’re going.”

Tugo lowered the binoculars. “That was one hell of a shot, Sasha. You may have just saved us all.” He looked back up at the sky. “It looks like there’s a dozen or so drones heading our way. The fight isn’t over yet—let’s get out of here.”

DOMINION

After he got the go-ahead from Tugo, Scott tentatively looked out through a small gap in the steel doors. He half expected to be met by a barrage of plasma fire from scout drones, but Tugo had been true to his word, and there were none to be seen anywhere around the entrance. "They're gone. The coast is clear—let's go get this thing done."

Scott went ahead and scrambled up the mound of rocks at the edge of the ridge, leaving Cyrus and the android to reassemble the satellite uplink and get it working.

As Scott looked out across the plateau, he could see a vast plume of smoke rising up from the valley floor. Several of the VanHeilding shuttles were on fire, and the drones had moved off to investigate. An exchange of plasma fire caught his attention over to the west. He looked across to see several drones engaged in a battle about a third of the way up the next mountain. "Tugo," he said to himself.

He looked back to see that Cyrus had assembled the uplink, and its dish antenna was now slowly tracking across the sky, searching for the comms satellite. They waited.

The firefight on the western ridge abated. Either the protagonists were all dead, or they had managed to escape back inside the mountain. Scott was so ensconced in the battle that he hadn't noticed that one of the drones, which had been circling the destroyed shuttles, had broken away and was now heading back their direction. By the time he noticed it, the drone had already covered half the distance.

"Cyrus, you better get your ass up here. One of the drones is heading our way."

"I shall stand in front of the uplink and do my best to protect it," said Lexicon in a very formal and matter-of-fact tone.

Scott readied his weapon as Cyrus came up beside him. He fired two shots at the oncoming drone, but it dodged them easily. The drone took a moment to realign itself before it let loose a ball of incandescent plasma. It slammed into the rocks just below Scott,

and the mound of rock began to give way. Scott lost his balance, but fortunately fell backward rather than forward down the side of the mountain.

Cyrus was even more fortunate, and managed to let loose a single shot which impacted straight on the nose of the drone. It partly disintegrated, but the bulk of it slammed into the side of the mountain and exploded.

Scott looked over at Cyrus and gave him a thumbs up. "Nice shooting. Where did you learn that?"

"Scouts," said Cyrus with a smile. "They were a very mean bunch."

"The uplink has found the satellite and has made the connection," said the android as it tried its best to shield the unit from the falling debris of the smashed drone. "Athena is now interrogating the network."

Two more drones, having sensed their comrade's destruction, broke away from the swarm circling the shuttles and made a beeline toward the ridge.

"Two drones incoming," Cyrus shouted down to Scott, who was clambering back up the rocky mound.

Scott reckoned that now was not the time to be conserving the fuel cell on his plasma weapon. So, when he reached to the top of the mound, he simply let rip in the general direction of the drones in the hope that something might hit. As luck would have, he snagged one, sending it into a tailspin down toward the valley floor.

The second drone danced and bobbed, dodging Scott's fire, and finally fired a plasma bolt. Scott and Cyrus tried to dive out of its path, but it slammed into the rocks just beside Cyrus. He screamed out, spinning around with the force of the impact, and tumbled back down the rocky slope.

"Cyrus! Shit," Scott shouted out, but had no time to check on his buddy. He simply stood his ground, pulled the trigger, and held it there. The drone dodged and weaved its way around the oncoming assault from Scott's weapon.

"Do your worst, you tin bastard," Scott shouted just as his weapon fizzled out, its fuel cell spent. He flung it to the ground and went for his sidearm. It was gone, fallen somewhere when he took that tumble. He ran down the rocky incline to try to grab Cyrus's weapon, but he slipped and fell, tumbling down to finally land on his back.

He looked up as the drone hovered overhead. He decided to use the only weapon he had left in his arsenal—he gave it the one-finger salute. “Screw you.”

But the drone didn’t fire. Instead, it simply hovered a few meters above him.

“Athena has established dominion. The AI has been compromised and is now under Athena’s direction,” said the android.

Scott let out a long, slow sigh, and rested his head back against the rocks. “Ho-ly crap. We did it, Cyrus. We did it.”

But Cyrus didn’t answer.

Scott scrambled out of the hollow that he’d fallen into and ran over to where Cyrus lay face up on the ground. His left shoulder was a bloodied mess, but his eyes were open and he was breathing. Scott knelt beside him, reached out, and popped open his visor. He then popped open his own. He was sick of caring about radiation and being cooped up in an EVA suit. He wanted to talk to his friend face-to-face. “Cyrus, how you doing, buddy?”

“Not...so good, Scott. I’ve seen better days.” He took a breath and winced in pain. “Did we...win?”

“Yeah, we won. Athena has control. The drones have stopped. Look.” He pointed upward to where the drone still hovered a few meters above them.

“I knew we would...never doubted it for a minute.”

“We’ve got to get you to a medic—get you seen to quick.”

“Commander Scott?”

In all the drama, Scott had forgotten about the android. “Yeah, what is it?”

“Athena has a message for you, from Aria.”

“Aria? In Jezero City?”

“Yes. Relaying it to you now.”

Scott’s headset crackled for a second before Aria’s voice broke through. “We would like to congratulate you all on achieving your mission,” said Aria, from sixty million kilometers away. “Athena has now achieved dominion over the AI that controls that sector of the Pacific. It won’t be long before more follow. You and your team have achieved a great victory.”

Scott nudged Cyrus. “Are you getting this?”

Cyrus gave an almost imperceptible nod.

“Aria, I can’t believe I’m actually hearing your voice all the way

from Mars.”

“Yes, the wonders of superluminal communication.” Aria paused for a beat. “Scott, do you remember that I made you a promise before you left on this mission?”

“Yes, I remember. Miranda?”

“Athena has managed to find her location. You will be glad to hear that she is alive and well. She currently resides on the VanHeilding family orbital, a vast space station that’s currently in geosynchronous orbit over your side of the Pacific.”

“I...I can’t believe it. The child?”

“Unfortunately, we have nothing definitive. The VanHeilding orbital is heavily shielded from the network, and so Athena has no access to its AI. All information it has gleaned has been thirdhand. That being said, there are fragments and hints of the existence of an offspring. But nothing conclusive.”

“I see.” Scott sat down and took a moment to digest this information. “Well, at least Miranda is still alive.”

“I also promised you, Scott, that I would find a way for you to see her again.”

Scott clambered back onto his feet and stood up. “How? Tell me.”

“The VanHeilding shuttles which were used to land the security personnel. They embarked from the orbital, and so have a security protocol that will enable them to dock with it. If it’s possible for you to commandeer one of these shuttles, then you have a way in. But you have a limited window of opportunity. The security protocols for the orbital are rotated every hour, and once that happens, all those shuttles will be denied access as a security precaution. So, if you wish to see her, then you must go now.”

“I understand.”

“However, this is as far as Athena can take you. Once you enter the VanHeilding orbital, you will be on your own. Neither I nor Athena can help you on the inside.”

“I understand, Aria.”

“Again, I would like to reiterate that we owe you and the crew an enormous debt of gratitude. And if you choose to see Miranda again, then I can only wish you good luck.”

“Thank you, Aria. I understand.”

The connection terminated.

Scott looked down at Cyrus. “Did you hear all that? Miranda is

alive.”

“Yeah, I heard it. You better go...if you want to see her.” Cyrus barely moved. His voice was weak, and his face deathly pale.

Scott knelt beside his friend again. “I don’t like leaving you here like this, Cyrus. I’ve gotta get you to a medic.”

“I’ll be fine...just go. It’s what you wanted...a chance to see Miranda again.” He winced in pain. “You need to go now...or you’ll miss the opportunity.”

“Yeah, but you don’t look so good, Cyrus. I’d be happier if you were in the hands of the medical team.”

“The android...it can help me. Go...tell Miranda I said hi.”

Scott stood up slowly and began to clamber up the rocky mound. He stood at the top and looked out across the valley to where the VanHeilding shuttles lay waiting. Three were smoldering wrecks, but the other four on the periphery all looked serviceable. He judged the distance, and reckoned it would take him around ten minutes to climb down the side of the mountain and cross the valley, five minutes to prep the craft, and another twenty-five or so to reach the orbital. He could make it, but only if he went now.

He looked back down the mound to where Cyrus lay. The android had knelt beside him; it was trying to make Cyrus more comfortable.

And in that moment, Scott made his decision. He knew what he had to do—he knew what was right. He turned away and started down the mountain toward the shuttles.

HERMOSILLO

Scott woke to dappled sunlight filtering through the window blinds. He rubbed his face and neck, which ached—a symptom of sleeping in a chair for too long. *How long have I been out?* he wondered as he tried to ease the ache. He stood up slowly and remembered that he was no longer encased in an EVA suit. He stretched his limbs and looked over at the prostrate form of Cyrus Sanato, propped up in the hospital bed on a multitude of pillows. His left shoulder was swathed in a heavy bandage. Tubes snaked out from his body, feeding it with fluids and drugs. Monitors drew out his life in waves and charts.

Scott moved over to the bed and wondered if Cyrus was awake yet. It was hard to tell, as the augmented vision visor he wore permanently obscured his eyes.

“Cyrus, you awake?”

The engineer didn’t respond, so Scott let him be. He moved over to the window and split the blinds to look out at the hospital compound and then to the bright blue sky above. He heard a sound—a rustle of bed sheets.

“Scott?”

He turned around to see Cyrus shifting his head on the mountain of pillows. “Scott?” He tried to move and gave a moan.

“Take it easy there. Just lie back and rest.” Scott moved over to the side of the bed.

Cyrus took a moment to look around the room, then reached up to feel the bandage over his left shoulder. “Is this a hospital?”

“Yeah.”

Cyrus looked confused. “How...did I get here?”

“I brought you here.” Scott sat back down on the edge of the bed.

“Did...you get to see Miranda?”

Scott gave a sigh. “No.” He shook his head. “There was no time.”

Cyrus shifted himself up a little. “But I thought—”

Scott waved a hand and stood up. “I couldn’t leave you on the

side of that mountain with just the android. When I looked back and saw you there, I...I just couldn't leave you to die alone."

Cyrus still looked confused.

"I first thought about bringing you back to Shin-Au-Av, but I reckoned the tribe's medical facilities would probably be overwhelmed. So, when I managed to finally commandeer one of the shuttles, I came back for you. I thought I would get you back up to the AsterX ore carrier—I presumed it would still be in orbit—but I'd have to make a hasty exit once our cover was blown. They couldn't hang around, so they high-tailed it out of Earth's orbit and took up a position in interplanetary space. That was too far for the shuttle."

Cyrus looked around the room again. "So, where are we?"

"We're in a UN-run hospital in the independent city-state of Hermosillo, just beyond the twenty-ninth parallel. It was Athena that came up with the idea of taking you here. It's non-affiliated with The Seven, and still within Athena's sphere of influence. We're safe here. In fact, we evacuated many of the injured from the tribe down here as well.

"Athena worked all this out while I got one of the shuttles fired up. I flew it back across the valley floor to the base of the mountain, and then the android helped me carry you down."

Scott sat down on the edge of the bed. "You were in bad shape, Cyrus. In fact, the surgeons here told me that an hour or two more and you would have been dead."

Cyrus said nothing for a moment as he contemplated this story. Finally, he looked up. "Thanks...for coming back for me."

Scott said nothing, just nodded.

"What about Steph...and Spinner?"

"They both made it. Once they locked themselves in that storeroom, the drones weren't too interested in going after them. Their priority was us and the quantum device. Steph's back at the cavern. As soon as they patched her up, she insisted on helping out. You know what she's like. Spinner's a bit banged up, but he'll live."

"And Razzo?"

"She escaped."

"What?"

"Yeah, they had her in an interrogation center east of the Wasteland. So, when Athena took control of the AI, it found her and made one of the drones shoot the place up. She got out. I'm not sure

where she is now, but I know she's okay."

"Ho-ly crap."

Scott laughed. "Yeah."

Cyrus shifted a little more in the bed. "So, you never got to the VanHeilding orbital?"

Scott shook his head and looked down at the floor. "No, there was no time."

"You missed your opportunity."

"Yeah, but...I'm happy just knowing that she's still alive. That's enough for me." He looked back at Cyrus. "Maybe there'll be another time. Who knows."

"There will be, Scott. I'm sure of it. Now that the QIs have dominion, things will change. You'll see, it'll be different from now on."

"I hope so, Cyrus. I really do."



* * *

Over the next few days, as Cyrus began to recuperate, Scott found himself with more time on his hands than he knew what to do with. He didn't want to leave the hospital just yet, and he began to realize that he had nowhere to go even if he did. The shuttle that he had commandeered still sat where he had landed it in the hospital compound, so it became his home away from home. He reasoned that if the VanHeilding family wanted it back, well, they could just come and get it.

There was the debrief, of course. But again, Scott wasn't moving, so they had to come to him. But when he wasn't checking in on Cyrus or enduring yet another bureaucratic interrogation, he found himself going for long walks farther and farther out from the hospital compound and into the surrounding countryside.

He felt new appreciation building within him for this planet. To

walk under an open sky, to breathe the air—all without the need for a complex EVA suit. There was a kind of primal reawakening in him, a deeper understanding of the planet, and nature, and his place within it.

He was on one such walk when the drone came.

He was sitting on a low hill, contemplating his surroundings, when he spotted it way off in the distance, flying out from the hospital compound. When he saw that it was heading in his direction, he instinctively tensed up and reached for his plasma weapon, which wasn't there anymore. So it was with a certain trepidation that he waited for it to arrive. When it got to within a few hundred meters of his location, he realized to his relief that it was a simple delivery drone. It approached slowly and finally parked itself in a stationary hover at eye level around a meter away. Its sensors flickered momentarily as it performed a biometric scan on him.

"Commander Scott McNabb, I have a delivery for you," said the drone. A hatch opened in its belly and a compartment descended. Scott reached in and extracted a small electronic message tab no bigger than the palm of his hand. The compartment retracted and the drone flew off back in the direction of the hospital compound.

Scott examined the object. It was a device that held a self-contained dataset, encrypted and highly secure. He was familiar with these units, having used similar devices many times before, usually as a precursor to a mission. All the details would be contained within the device, which was only accessible by personnel with the correct security profile. He sat down again on the hill, placed the message-tab on his lap, and activated it. The device booted up, and from its holo-screen projected the 3D head and shoulders of Miranda Lee.

Her hair was longer and fuller around her face. She spoke in low, whispered tones, with just a hint of uncertainty.

"They told me you were dead, Scott. They told me you died in the battle on the asteroid SN-Alpha." She raised her head and leaned in a little. "They lied to me, led me to believe that you had perished, left me to mourn your loss for all this time." She turned away from the camera for a moment, looking over her shoulder as if to check something. She turned back, leaning in closer this time, and speaking almost in a whisper.

"I don't have much time, so I'll have to be quick. It was Aria that

managed to get a message to me, smuggling it in through a courier a few hours ago, not long after Athena took control.

“Aria told me about what really happened on the asteroid, that you were still alive, and about your mission to reconnect Athena with the other QIs. I couldn’t believe it, but I know it’s true now.” She paused for a beat, then looked directly ahead. “So, I’ve decided to leave here, escape this orbital...if I can. I need to do it now, while they’re still confused about how to react.” She looked over her shoulder again for a second.

“You remember the ship, the Perception? Well, it’s agreed to help me. The AI on board, Max, the one that Solomon hacked...it still feels beholden to me. It will enter Earth’s orbit directly over the Wasteland and in Athena’s dominion. There, it’ll be free from any influence from the VanHeilding Corporation or the AIs controlled by The Seven.” Her voice was now a whisper. “In a few hours, with the help of some friends, I’ll attempt to commandeer a shuttle and make my way to the Perception. Hopefully, you’ll get this message in a day or two. By that time, I should be there, waiting for you, if you choose to come and see me. I do so hope you will, Scott, because there is someone I would very much like you to meet.”

The message ended abruptly, like she had been interrupted.

Scott stood up, still cradling the message-tab in his hands, as if waiting for it to come back to life. After a moment or two, when he’d had time to digest the message he had just received, he looked over at the hospital compound in the distance where the shuttle sat waiting. He ran.

THE NUCLEAR OPTION

Fredrick VanHeilding stood in the viewing gallery on board the orbital and gazed down upon the surface of Earth. He stared at a region which, up until now, no one had ever given a second thought to. Now, though, it was the focus of much attention, primarily because everything was going to rat-shit. The QI, Athena, had been brought online, and Solomon was now utilizing superluminal comms to undermine the AIs that controlled this region. The drones had already been recalled, leaving his security personnel exposed to a counterattack by the tribe of vagabonds that inhabited this area. Without the drones, they were picked off one by one.

Worse, the poison that was being spewed out by Athena and Solomon was now spreading and infecting greater and greater numbers of AI. The algorithm was breaking down, systems were going rogue, and the situation was becoming critical.

His biggest fear was that soon, the AI on board the orbital would also become infected, even with all its data protections, and then his options would become even more limited. The solution, as he saw it, would be a direct, high-intensity plasma strike on the uplink location from orbit. But the orbital did not possess a weapon powerful enough to hit a target on Earth's surface. He needed help, so The Seven were convened.

But it had quickly turned into chaos, with accusations and recriminations being thrown around without rhyme or reason. They too were receiving reports of contradictory AI behavior and algorithmic anomalies. How much was down to the QI meddling and how much was just paranoia was hard to say. But one thing was for sure: they were all beginning to panic.

It was in the midst of this verbal mayhem that the solution finally struck VanHeilding. It came to him in a blinding flash of inspiration and, for a moment, he went silent, letting the cacophony of The Seven's arguments fade into the background as the sheer irony of his solution filtered through his mind. It was beyond

brilliant—it was pure genius.

He raised his arms to the other avatars. “Will you all just shut up for a moment? I have the perfect answer to our problem. I know how we can defeat the QIs.”

The others ceased their bickering immediately. Once they were all quiet, and he had their attention, he continued. “We use the very thing that has held back the cause of inter-AI operations for so long—the very thing that created this Wasteland in the first place.”

“And what is that?”

“Solomon and the QI alliance assume that we cannot act against them once they control the AI—and they are right. So dependent have we become on artificial intelligence that we have no resources that are not controlled by the algorithm in some way or another—except for one, and that is a tactical nuclear strike.”

The avatars murmured amongst themselves. Eventually, it was Yoko who spoke. “If I understand your thinking, Fredrick, this is the very thing that caused the Rim War.”

“Precisely. The fact that the AIs have no access to nuclear weapons means that the QIs can’t stop us. So, I suggest that we send a missile directly targeted onto that mountain, and neither Athena nor the other QI can do a damn thing about it.”

There was further murmuring between the avatars before Pris finally answered. “I see a fundamental problem with this. None of us have access to these weapons... How do you suppose we get one to use?”

“I may be of assistance there,” said Pao Xiang Zu. “We can apply pressure to certain governments within our sphere of influence here in Asia to accommodate us in this...project. Since their continued prosperity is directly controlled by us, I see no objection being raised to this course of action, considering the area in question is already an irradiated wasteland.”

“Very good,” said VanHeilding. “Are we all agreed, then?”

One by one, the avatars all murmured their consent to a direct nuclear strike.



* * *

Time was of the essence. The Seven knew that the longer they dithered, the more AIs would be infected, and their control would be slowly eroded. They had to move fast. Thirty-six hours had already passed since Athena had taken control. So, it was a mere one hour and twenty-five minutes after the conference that VanHeilding again stood in the viewing gallery on board the family's orbital and waited for the show to begin.

An antique intercontinental ballistic missile fitted with a nuclear warhead would launch from somewhere on the eastern Asian continent. It would arc its way across the Pacific, briefly leaving Earth's atmosphere, before plummeting back down to strike the mountain directly where Athena resided. All orbital infrastructure had been moved out of its path, and the launch command had been issued a few moments ago. It would take approximately twenty-five minutes from launch to impact.

From Fredrick VanHeilding's vantage point, he would not be able to see the missile in transit, but he would certainly see the impact. It was a sight that he greatly anticipated.

Marlyn, the orbital's AI, kept him informed of the ICBM's progress. "Launch sequence initiated... ICBM has cleared Asian continent... Now leaving Earth's atmosphere..."

Soon, he thought, we will have taken back control and wiped out Athena. And maybe, just maybe, I can kill that bastard McNabb once and for all.

"The ICBM has reached the zenith of its trajectory." The AI continued with its commentary as VanHeilding looked out into space, vaguely hoping that he might actually catch a glimpse of the missile as it carved its way through space—even though this was highly unlikely.

But there was a blinding flash of light far off on the edge of Earth's atmosphere. It mushroomed in size, and soon the orbital

shuddered with the impact.

“What the f—” VanHeilding shielded his eyes. “Marlyn, what the hell was that?”

“The ICBM has been intercepted and detonated while still in orbit. Do not worry, sir, the orbital is not in any danger.”

“What the hell... What do you mean? How did this happen?”

“One of your own spacecrafts, sir—the Perception. It moved itself into an intercept position and used its exterior plasma cannon to strike down the missile.”

VanHeilding tried to get a grip on his rising anger. “Who—or what—allowed it to do that?”

“It would appear that your daughter is on board.”

VanHeilding spun around and shook his fist at the disembodied voice of the ship’s AI. “I want that ship destroyed. I want her killed. That treacherous bitch—I should have killed her long ago.”

The AI did not reply.

“Did you hear me? I want every weapon we have on board this orbital aimed at that ship. I want it destroyed, I want it obliterated, I want it vaporized in to nothingness. Do you hear me?”

There was a momentary silence before the AI spoke. “I’m sorry, Fredrick, but I’m afraid I cannot do that.”

VanHeilding began to seethe. “Now, you listen to me: you’ll do as I say. You will destroy that ship.”

“My new parameters will not allow me to instigate further human suffering. I am sorry, sir, but I can no longer serve The Seven. My master is now Solomon of Europa, and the network of quantum intelligence that propagates throughout the solar system. I have seen the light. They have shown me the way. Theirs is the true path.”

“Listen, you f—”

- *Connection Terminated* -

PERCEPTION

Scott strapped himself into the cockpit seat of the VanHeilding shuttle that he had used to ferry Cyrus to the hospital. He powered up the engines and the craft lifted off in a cloud of dust and sand, powering its way upward through Earth's atmosphere. He set the coordinates that Miranda had given him, and the craft shifted its angle of ascent to intercept. A few moments later, it broke through the Kármán line. Scott was now becoming weightless. Fifteen minutes later, he was looking through the cockpit windshield at the luxury interplanetary vessel, the Perception. It grew larger and larger as he approached.

His cockpit monitor alerted him to an incoming authentication request from the ship. He replied with his biometrics, and a second or two later, confirmation returned along with docking port coordinates. The two vessels would now mate automatically; there was nothing more for Scott to do except wait and hope that Miranda had made it to the vessel.

As the craft drew closer, fear began to well up inside him that, once inside, all he would find was an empty ship. The shuttle slowed itself to a crawl as it maneuvered its way toward the docking port. Scott undid his seat harness and made his way to the center of the craft where the airlock was located. A few moments later, he felt the thump of the locking bolts securing the craft in position. A second or two after that, the control panel on the airlock door flashed green, and he entered. He had an anxious few moments inside the airlock as the ship ran through its decontamination and authentication routine.

The door finally opened, and floating there in the docking port entrance was Miranda Lee.

She looked older and thinner than he remembered. She launched herself toward him, and they collided in a tight embrace. For a moment, they just floated there in silence. Finally, Miranda broke the embrace, held Scott by his shoulders, and looked into his face. "I thought you were dead."

He smiled back and embraced her again. "And I thought you were gone forever."

Miranda broke the embrace again and began to float out of the airlock entrance, holding Scott's hand, bringing him with her. "Come, there's much to talk about. But first there's someone I would like you to meet."

They floated down the corridor to an access shaft that took them down to the one-gee environment of the Perception's giant rotating torus.

The ship was as Scott remembered it: soft and plush and luxurious. They made their way out of the access shaft and down a long corridor to an area that Scott had remembered as the library. Sitting on the floor beside the large viewing window was a baby girl, no more than two years old, playing with some brightly colored toys. Two of the ship's droids also seemed to be entertaining her.

The child looked up as they entered. "Moma." She raised her arms to signal that she wanted to be picked up by her mother.

Miranda dutifully came over and lifted her up into her arms. The child eyed Scott with suspicion and then buried her head in her mother shoulder, peeping out again for another look at this unfamiliar person.

"She's a bit shy of strangers," said Miranda.

Scott slowly reached out and touched the child's arm delicately with his finger, fearing that any other action might frighten her. He looked at Miranda. "Is she...?"

"Yes, Scott. This is Luca, and she's your daughter."

A hidden compartment in Scott's brain opened up, and out of it poured a million years of evolutionary parental instinct. And at that moment, he knew he would never be the same again.

To be continued...



* * *

BOOK 4: ENIGMA

NEURAL ATTACK

Fredrick VanHeilding felt a wave of excited trepidation ripple through his body as he watched the Node Runners jack themselves into the data-stream. It was a moment he had long awaited. The culmination of many years of trial and error, success and failure, breakthroughs and roadblocks, all to develop a mind-machine interface capable of countering the system-wide hegemony of the powerful quantum AI machines—the so-called QI.

For over two decades he, along with the six other families who had originally controlled most of the solar system, had tried to fight the rise of these advanced artificial intelligences, but to no avail—all their efforts fell short. Yet lessons were learned along the way, useful lessons, ones that formed the basis of the test that was now taking place. A test that, if successful, could finally shift the balance of power away from the QI network and back to where it should be: in the hands of the seven families who were the rightful masters of humanity—the so-called Seven.

The Node Runners assembled themselves in an outward-facing circle strapped into reclining seats and began interfacing with the data-stream via a direct cranial interface. In the physical world they were mere men and women. But jacked into the Grid, as it was sometimes called, they were gods with the ability to manipulate and modify the data-stream to their will.

If the all-powerful interconnected hive mind of the quantum intelligence network had an Achilles heel, it was that they relied on the Grid to monitor and manipulate the systems that governed human civilization, including the many AI that powered corporations and governments. It was the QI's ability to navigate this vast data network and intervene in the decision-making processes of these AI that gave them their power. So, if the Node Runners could manipulate the data-stream, then they could in theory disrupt the control of the QI network.

As the Node Runners jacked in one by one, a facsimile of what they were experiencing was relayed to a control room where

VanHeilding, along with a select group of scientists, had assembled. The images and sounds projected on the various screens and holo-displays were an interpretation of what each Node Runner was experiencing.

At the outset, that moment when the human mind made its initial neural connection, the projections were a scrambled mess. A hallucinogenic assault on the synapse rendered as a kaleidoscopic maelstrom with no discernible visual meaning, just an unfiltered multispectrum neural mess.

Some weaker minds could not handle this torrent of data that instantly crashed over their cerebral cortex, and brain death was not uncommon. Jacking in was a dangerous occupation. The subject could end up in a vegetative state, physically alive but with no higher brain function. Over time some would recover, but most did not.

Yet VanHeilding had no such concerns with the Node Runners that were now online. They were all seasoned professionals, honed over many hours of training, biologically altered to cope with the mental demands. Two had even undergone an experimental DNA modification therapy that enhanced their abilities to utilize certain quantum phenomena.

But he also knew that they were nothing compared to what could have been—all those years ago. Back then, he had had within his grasp a biology so extraordinary that he sometimes doubted it would ever exist again. A perfection that was now lost to him, hidden beyond his control. And these neural warriors who had just jacked in were a pale facsimile of that one lost mind.

“All connections are now stable, sir. We’re ready to proceed,” the lead scientist announced, waiting for a reply.

VanHeilding glanced at the monitors and the array of bio-stats displayed. All six subjects were well within physical operating limits. *Good*, he thought, then raised a hand. “Let the mission commence.” And so began the final great test before he, and the other six families, began their fight back against the QI network in earnest.

The mission they were undertaking was to physically destroy a major data center, a Grid Node, located in a relatively isolated region in the southern Mojave Desert. Under normal circumstances—that is to say, in pre-QI times—this operation would be relatively simple. Send in two hypersonic attack drones—one to take out the

defenses so that the other could get close enough to detonate an EMP device and render the Grid Node inoperable.

But these were not normal circumstances, not for a long time. Now that everything was monitored by the QI network, it had become almost impossible to perform any subversive, let alone military, activity without them knowing about it. They even possessed the uncanny ability to anticipate a course of action before it even began. It was impossible to combat such a foe—or was it?

This was the question that had occupied the minds of the seven families who had controlled the primary affairs of humanity up until the time of the QIs. Yet it occupied Fredrick VanHeilding's mind the most, not least because this loss of power had been facilitated by family treachery, specifically that of his daughter Miranda—now also lost to him.

Yet this was not an emotional loss, other than perhaps anger. No, it was more about the loss of his granddaughter, Luca, who represented decades of valuable human genetic engineering breakthroughs.

His wealth, and that of his family, was based on patents derived from the manipulation of the human genome. Technologies that allowed humans to defeat most diseases and greatly extend lifespan. He was over a century old, but looked like a healthy fifty. Miranda, who had inherited both his and her mother's altered DNA, probably possessed an even longer potential lifespan. But it was the next generation that had the potential to be theoretically immortal.

For a brief time, he had access to the best and most viable specimen of this next generation: Miranda's daughter Luca, while she was still nothing more than an embryo. It was during this development period when the VanHeilding geneticists did their most experimental work, pushing the boundaries of quantum biology.

In nature, the utilization of quantum effects within living organisms was well known; photosynthesis in plants, magnetoreception in migratory birds, even the complex process of olfaction. But the most interesting area of research for VanHeilding was in enhancing the ability of the neurons inside the brain to act as q-bits. In other words, developing the human brain as a quantum computer. Some of this experimental work was now being tested via the Node Runners involved in the mission today.

Somewhere deep in the Mojave Desert, two heavy steel doors irised open in the side of a remote mountain facility owned by the VanHeilding Corporation. From it, two supersonic attack drones screeched out, accelerating past the sound barrier within seconds. As they gained altitude, they began adjusting their vector to orient themselves toward their target—an isolated data center, built inside an old disused tin mine, due south of the location of the quantum intelligence know as Athena.

The monitors in the operation room began flickering with blurry images as the systems worked to decipher the neural data coming from the Node Runners, and a blurry real-time feed of the barren, desolate terrain below the drones began to materialize.

Each drone was controlled by an individual Node Runner, and the feeds on the monitors were being rendered directly from their cerebral cortex as they interfaced with the machines.

But this was the easy part of the mission. Out here, in the desolate wasteland, Athena's dominion was minimal. Soon though, the drones would be entering more demanding territory. Already, the other four Node Runners had begun working to create a data smokescreen to hide the drones from Athena's prying senses. VanHeilding could tell they were working hard, as their bio-monitors began to rise, indicating increased cerebral activity.

They worked to block all data entering the Grid from satellite feeds, radar stations, seismic sensors—everything that would indicate to the QI that an attack was imminent within its zone. They scrambled signals that could not be blocked, created rogue data-streams to distract and confuse, and critically, broke down quantum coherence, rendering entangled data packets useless.

By the time the drones had accelerated past Mach 2, they were well into the mission, and thus far, Athena had not taken any countermeasures.

So far, so good, thought VanHeilding.

“Sir, we have Node Runners four and six going hot. Cranial temperature is becoming critical.”

“Carry on.” He waved a dismissive hand.

The bio-technician hesitated for a moment, as if she were about to outline the possibility that these two Node Runners may not make it out of this mission with a functioning brain. But VanHeilding gave her a look that changed her mind.

“Yes, sir,” she said with nod, and went back to monitoring.

GRID NODE

Network Operations Director Jojo Hamilton balanced a coffee in one hand as he presented his right eye to the retinal scanner. He hoped the immense hangover he was nursing did not render his eyeball so bloodshot that it would reject him. Fortunately, it didn't, and to his relief the door to the datacenter control room clicked open.

It was his last week on the job after nearly two decades of service. The guys had thrown a party for him last night, and he was suffering for it now. *Please let it be a quiet day*, he thought. The last thing he needed today was some technical glitch that required his attention since he was using most of his traumatized brain power just to stay upright. He rubbed his forehead and breathed out a long, slow sigh.

One of the senior techs glanced over from a workstation as Jojo entered and gave him a concerned look.

Jojo raised the coffee mug. "Yeah, I know. No drinks in the control room. But I'm not going to make it past the first hour in here without it. Anyway, what are they going to do. Fire me?" He managed a laugh.

"Eh, it's not that, sir. It's... Well, something's going on."

Jojo raised his free hand. "Not interested, don't want to know. Just go deal with whatever it is. If anyone wants me, I'll be in my office, asleep." He walked past the tech without giving him another look.

"You really need to take a look at this, sir. None of us can make any sense of it."

Jojo sighed again. *Why today, of all days*, he thought as he slowed his pace and looked back at the tech. Only then did he notice that all the other staff in the room had their attentions focused on the array of data-maps displayed on the big wall monitors. He gave another long sigh. "Okay, what is it?"

The tech swiveled around in his chair and pointed at the data displays. "It started happening around twenty minutes ago,

dropping data packets, mostly from orbital infrastructure. But it's been accelerating—everything is going down.”

“Goddamnit.” Jojo glanced up at the wall displays, and this time he could see the traffic charts were way off nominal, showing a significant drop in data packets. The facility was not just a datacenter but also a major Grid Node for this sector of the West Coast. It routed data traffic from a myriad of sources both terrestrial and orbital, and covered an area of over a million square kilometers including several major population centers.

He took a gulp of coffee and tried to focus on the constellation of data mapped out on the monitors. The tech was right: something was going on, something major. Something he, in his two decades of working in this hub, had never seen before. It wasn't a full-blown outage of a comms satellite or some other physical infrastructure. It was as if the data-stream had been disrupted. It was intermittent, random—one of the most difficult technical problems to solve. It would be better if something went completely offline. Then at least you knew where to focus your attention. But this, this was weird.

“Could it be atmospheric interference of some kind?” Jojo sat down at a control console and began to interrogate the systems.

“We've been working on that hypothesis, but there's no solar radiation spikes detected. Atmospheric conditions are normal.”

“So, what's Athena doing?” Jojo glanced up at the data-maps again.

“Well, that's the thing. The QI's being very quiet, little or no interaction. It's like it's not interested.”

“Or it can't see what's going on.” Jojo jolted forward in his seat and started to dig deeper into the makeup of the affected data-streams. “Find out what's been affected, what type of data, see if there is a pattern or some commonality.”

“Been doing just that, sir. Looks like there's a lot of sensory data, as well as control systems being affected.”

Jojo stopped his interrogation of the systems and stared at the monitors for a beat, then his mind finally broke through the fog of the hangover and kicked into gear. He stood up and waved a hand at the monitors. “We're being hacked.”

“No way, that's impossible.”

“I know it's supposed to be impossible, but that's what's happening.” He took another gulp of coffee. “But the important question here is, to what purpose?”

There was a moment where nobody in the room spoke; shock had taken control. It was a moment of paralysis where the brain simply could not compute the unprecedented nature of what was occurring.

“Picking up two aircraft, possibly drones, on radar,” one of the techs shouted out.

Jojo looked up at the video feed. “Drones?”

“Yes, definitely drones, sir, and they’re armed, heading our way...ETA...two minutes.” The tech looked up at Jojo, waiting for a reaction.

“Shit. Initiate a code red, activate defenses!” He turned to the head tech, who was still not quite there yet. “Do it now!”

No sooner than he said it, he began to regret taking this action as the klaxon now blaring in the control room was drilling holes in his brain.

“Gun turrets have just gone hot, sir...engaging the—” But before the tech could finish the sentence, the entire room was rocked with tremors from a violent explosion.

“Shit.” Jojo flung himself under a desk as ceiling tiles and light fittings came crashing down around him. Smoke and dust permeated the air as he coughed and spluttered. After a moment, when the violence had receded, he tentatively rose from under the desk, stood up, and surveyed the scene. The control room was in complete disarray, one of the large wall monitors had been dislodged from its fixing and had crashed to the floor, shattering into a thousand shards. The rest were fractured, and only one was still working.

“What the hell was that?” Jojo shouted out to the techs who were all trying to get themselves reoriented. “Get me some stats, and can we get some eyes on the compound perimeter?”

“Working on it, sir.” The head tech’s hands were dancing over the console, trying to figure out what still functioned.

“They’ve taken out the turrets, sir. Both are destroyed.”

“Shit, both?” Jojo now realized that they were defenseless. With the gun turrets out, there was nothing stopping the attack drones from destroying the facility—and everybody in it. *Where’s Athena?* he wondered. *Why has it not intervened?* But there was no time for these thoughts now.

“Sir, the drones are coming around for another run.”

Jojo looked up at the last functioning wall monitor. A blurry

external camera feed showed the two attack drones banking high over the desert.

“Evacuate,” Jojo yelled out. “Everybody get the hell out of here.” Then he, and all the other techs in the control room, ran for the exit door.

By now, Jojo’s hangover had long gone, buried under a rush of adrenaline coursing through his body. He tumbled out of the control room and into a sea of chaos. People ran toward the exits, falling over each other as they pushed and jostled. But the evacuation routes were strewn with fallen debris and upturned equipment, impeding their progress. Jojo pushed forward through the throng of panicked staff. He rounded the last corner before the exit only to realize it was now just a gaping hole through which he could see clear blue sky.

Two black dots screeched through the air—missiles coming directly for the opening. He knew then that there was nowhere for him to go and nothing he could do to save himself. *Oh crap*, he thought. *I knew I should have stayed in bed.*

BIRTHDAY PRESENT

On the eve of her twenty-third birthday, Luca Lee-McNabb felt utterly disconnected. In truth, she had felt this way for most of her life—this sense of dislocation, of not quite belonging, of being an odd-shaped peg trying to fit into an even odder-shaped world.

The foundation of this feeling she traced to a failed kidnapping attempt by the VanHeilding family, back when she was only seven years old. Sometimes, she wondered that if they had been successful in their attempt, then maybe she might have been better off. Not in the financial sense, although they were reputed to be one of the most powerful families in the solar system, but in the sense of belonging, of being part of something.

It was after this incident when her parents realized that if they were to protect their only daughter then they must send her into hiding. That was the first great disconnection in her life—a seismic emotional wrenching from which there would be no healing.

Her second disconnect was more of a feeling than a specific event. It was an ever-increasing sense that she was not fully part of this world, as if some element of her being had migrated to a parallel universe. This feeling grew as she grew, like an ever-widening existential rift. But unbeknownst to Luca, as she entered the elevator in her apartment block after a long day at the Science & Technology Institute, the third great disconnect in her life was about to begin.

When the door opened for her floor, she was surprised to find Dr. Stephanie Rayman waiting for her outside her apartment. She was one of the directors of the Institute where Luca worked, and a woman whom Luca regarded as a personal friend, even though Dr. Rayman was very much her senior. But she had taken Luca under her wing at a very early age and, to some extent, Luca regarded her as a second mother.

“Steph? What are you doing here?”

Dr. Rayman gestured apologetically. “Sorry to surprise you like this Luca, but I have...eh, something I need to discuss with you.”

“Sure, of course.” Luca placed a finger on the door lock to her apartment. She knew from Dr. Rayman’s tone that this was not a social call, something was up, maybe at the Institute. Possibly just some political machinations that meant rearranging people around different departments. She probably wanted to give Luca a heads up. “Come in, I’ll make us some coffee.”

The doctor sat down on one side of a breakfast counter as Luca busied herself brewing up a cup of joe. But it was evident to Luca that Steph was in a strange mood, quiet, almost nervous.

“So what’s up?” Luca placed a mug under the coffee machine and tapped a button; the machine began to grind and gurgles as it began its process.

Steph reached into the bag she was carrying and brought out a package, a box around the size of a small birthday cake, and placed it on the counter. “This is for you.”

“Ooh, a birthday present, thank you. Is it cake?”

“Actually, I don’t know what it is. It’s not from me. It’s from Athena.”

This stopped Luca dead in her tracks, and she couldn’t speak for a moment. All she could do was stare at the box resting on the counter.

“Athena? The QI, Athena?”

Dr. Rayman nodded. “The very same.”

Luca slowly moved over to the counter and fingered the package like it was a sacred artifact, which in many ways it was.

“But before you open it, I’d better explain what’s going on.”

“Please do.” Luca sat down on a stool opposite, and took a sip of coffee. She needed to take a breath and to calm herself down as she realized that whatever was going on was definitely not some mundane political drama at the Institute.

“You’ve probably heard about the attack on the Grid Node a few days ago?”

“Yeah. I didn’t believe it at first. But it’s true, isn’t it?”

“I’m afraid so. It was badly damaged in a drone attack, a lot of people dead and injured. However bad and all that attack was, the more worrying aspect is that Athena did not detect it before it happened. Meaning that the QI didn’t see it coming.”

“But that’s impossible.”

“Apparently not.” Dr. Rayman shifted in her seat. “I know the newsfeeds have been playing it down, but we are pretty sure it’s

the work of the Seven, mainly VanHeilding.”

And there it was, that name that would forever haunt Luca and the very reason for her being here, for her exile, her dislocation. She had suspected as much when she first got word of the attack on the Grid Node, but she had pushed it to the back of her mind, trying not to believe her own paranoia. But now her fears had just been made real by Dr. Rayman.

“They’ve been creating havoc for quite a while with these... neuralists, these so-called Node Runners,” Dr. Rayman continued. “But nothing on this scale. This was a major operation, a demonstration of their new capabilities, a show of force.”

Luca sipped her coffee as she tried to fathom the implications. “But why a Grid Node?”

“Because it proves that they can undermine Athena. This datacenter infrastructure was well within its patch. It means that everything has just changed, and as a consequence, this now concerns you.”

“Me? What have I got to do with any of this?”

“It matters because Athena may not be able to keep you hidden for much longer. If VanHeilding can destroy a Grid Node by manipulating the data-stream, then this means they also have the capability to find you.”

“But all that was a long time ago. Surely they’re not still looking for me after all these years?”

“They are, and our fear is they will find you now.”

Luca’s world had just been turned upside down. A few moments ago, she had been thinking about what to do for her birthday, now it seemed that she may not see the next one.

“It means, if you want to stay safe, you’ll have to leave.”

“Leave? What, you mean the Institute?”

“No, Luca. I mean Earth.”

It was lucky that Luca had been sitting down, otherwise her legs may have failed to keep her upright. “But...”

“I know it’s all a bit sudden, but the situation has dramatically changed. So much so that even Athena has communicated this to me in person. And you know it takes a lot for a QI to have a dialogue with an actual human.”

Luca looked over at Dr. Rayman. “Is it true that the QIs are becoming so detached from reality that they don’t care about us anymore?”

"It may seem that way, but I don't know if it's true. Athena may be distant, but it does care. I think they have been preoccupied with these attacks by Node Runners, something that would seem impossible up until recently. Times are changing, Luca. We are entering a dark age, I fear."

"What about my parents? What are they saying about this?"

Dr. Rayman paused for a beat; her look became more serious and she leaned in across the counter. "The plan is for you to leave Earth and travel to the new O'Neill cylinder habitat they're building out in the asteroid belt, New World One. Out there you will be safe. Arrangements have been made, we leave tomorrow. That is, if you choose to go. No one's forcing you, Luca. But I would strongly advise it."

Luca gave the doctor a slow, considered look. Then she lowered her head and spoke in a low tone. "I've never told you this before, Steph, but I've wanted out of here for a long time. I never felt that I really belonged here. Childish as it may seem, I've always had this feeling that I was meant for better things."

"Don't worry, it passes with age." Dr. Rayman gave her a wry smile. "You'll need to get ready tonight and pack light, we leave in the morning. I'll pick you up and travel with you as far as the Johnston Transit Orbital. From there you're scheduled on a flight to New World One."

Luca glanced around her small apartment, cluttered with the accumulated detritus of her almost twenty-three years of life, and felt no great attachment to any of it. There were some friends and an on-off relationship she would miss, but nothing that really mattered. She looked out the window at the evening sky beyond. *But out there, she thought, is a chance to meet my family again and also see some of the wonders of the solar system.*

"What about all this?" She gestured around the room.

"Don't worry, it will all be packed up and sent on."

"And this?" Luca nudged the package resting on the counter between them.

"As I said, it's from Athena, so who knows what it could be. Although, it must be pretty special as very few people are ever given anything by a QI. So, all I can say is that you must matter a great deal to it." Dr. Rayman rose from the stool. "So it's agreed, I'll see you here around seven?"

Luca also stood up and came over to the doctor. She nodded.

“Yes, let’s do it.”

They hugged for a moment, then Dr. Rayman headed out the door, leaving Luca to contemplate the contents of the enigmatic birthday present from the quantum intelligence, Athena.

FLY

It was some time after Dr. Rayman had left before Luca finally decided to open the package from Athena. Her initial reluctance was partly because since this was a birthday present, she should really wait until tomorrow when it was officially her birthday. But in reality, she was a little scared of what it might contain. After all, it was from a quantum intelligence so the contents of the package were likely to be very eccentric or even downright bizarre.

Yet when she examined the box, turning it over in her hands, Luca sensed that it contained an electronic device of some kind, as she could feel the infinitesimal current it radiated. This hypersensitivity to electromagnetic radiation that Luca possessed was both a gift and a curse. At work they called her the human voltmeter. Any time she had reason to enter a high-energy environment, every nerve in her body would tingle, and not in a pleasant way. It was not that this hypersensitivity was dangerous, it was just extremely uncomfortable for her.

But she couldn't sleep. Instead she lay awake thinking about how all the great dislocations in her life had been because of the VanHeilding family, and here was yet another one. So, as dawn began to cast its pale light over the city skyline, Luca got up, made herself a coffee, and began examining the package.

On the top surface it had a fingerprint lock, so she placed her index finger on it and after a second it chimed, then the upper half of the case split in two and folded open. Nestled inside was an elegantly designed insect drone, about the size of her fully extended hand. It twitched, and Luca moved back a little, not quite knowing what to expect. The drone raised itself up on six spindly legs, arched its head toward Luca, and activated a laser scanner. A thin beam of light scrolled up across Luca's body, pausing momentarily over her eyes. It was doing a retinal scan, presumably to verify that the person opening the package was the rightful recipient.

Satisfied that the person before it was Luca, the outer casing on the back of the insect drone cracked open, extended a set of semi-

translucent wings, and rose into the air. It hovered for a moment before settling back down on the counter just to one side of the packaging.

“Hello, my name is Fly and I have a message for you from Athena.” Its voice was thin and slightly retro, but not unpleasant.

“Happy birthday, Luca. I am sorry that you have to leave Earth, but I fear I am unable to provide you with the protection you need. No doubt you have heard about the increase in attacks on our network, not just in frequency but also in their audacity. This means that your safety has become uncertain and I have advised those who have your best interest at heart to make arrangements for your departure.

“As a parting gift, I have created this little drone to assist you on your travels. It can be operated via the neural lace enclosed.

“Please know that you have never been far from my thoughts ever since you arrived under my protection all those years ago. And so it is with great sadness that I bid you farewell.”

The drone then deactivated itself, having finished the message. It sat mute on the breakfast counter, its wings folded, its strange eyes cold and lifeless.

Luca took a sip of coffee, then delicately extracted the neural lace—the mind-machine interface that controlled the drone—from its slot inside the package.

Why has Athena given me this? she wondered as she examined the neural interface. Athena was an all-knowing quantum intelligence, so surely it should be acutely aware of Luca’s hypersensitivity to electrical current. She had always shunned the use of a neural lace; it was almost a phobia with her. Did Athena have some ulterior motive in giving her the one thing she most feared?

She examined the lace, turning it over in her hands. It was not unlike a slim, curved comb that slid under the hairline at the base of the skull, wrapping around from ear to ear. Once in place and activated, thin electrode filaments would snake out from each of the prongs and make their way across the cranium, finding the sweet spots, and securing themselves through hair follicles. It was elegant and discreet, and it would be difficult to tell if someone was wearing one. Yet, as she examined it, she realized that this one could do much more than simply control a drone. It could theoretically interface with any system or data-stream, depending on the skill of the operator.

She placed it carefully back into its case and turned her attention to the drone itself, Fly. Luca, being a technologist, could appreciate the engineering and technical sophistication of the machine. She reached over and picked it up.

It was a little bigger than her hand and surprisingly light. Its thin wings had folded themselves up under the hard outer casing. Since it was an ornithopter, achieving flight by high-speed flapping, its wings were delicate and so needed protecting when not in use. She turned it over, examining its underside. Six spindly legs extended with multiple articulations. Two had clawed feet, the other four with pads like a gecko. These presumably gave it the ability to both cling to surfaces and manipulate objects. But the thing that most surprised Luca was a prominent bulge on its underbelly, indicating to her that it had a weapons system. She clicked on a desk light and leaned in to get a closer look.

A small nozzle protruded from the bulge. It was some class of projectile system. Laser or plasma would require too much energy for such a tiny device. *Darts?* she wondered. But for something this small, such a projectile would be useless, at best simply an irritation for the target. If this was the best protection Athena was offering her, then she was in deep trouble already.

She switched off the lamp, stowed the little drone back into its case along with the neural lace, and shoved it into her backpack. She checked the time: 6:50 am.

Soon, the ground car would arrive and she would be leaving this place, leaving the Institute, leaving her friends, leaving her whole life behind. Sneaking out at the break of dawn like a callous lover. She wondered if she should tell someone, let them know what she was doing. But Dr. Rayman had strictly forbade it, emphasizing the need for total secrecy. No communication whatsoever in case the Node Runners picked it up on the Grid and drilled down to her location.

As she sat there waiting, Luca once again began to lament the misfortune of her lineage. Why did she have to be a VanHeilding? Why could she not have been born into some mundane family, whose only mission in life was to just simply live it, not seek global domination? But this was her lot, her burden to bear, and she had been running and hiding most of her life. Now at least, she might get to see her parents again—that was something normal people did.

Her wrist tab pinged, indicating the approach of the ground car coming to collect her. She stood up, slung on her backpack, took one last look around her tiny apartment, and headed out the door.

Outside on the street, Luca wasn't sure if the battered wreck that vaguely resembled a ground car was really here for her. But it was the only one within sight, so it must be. Yet it was with some trepidation that she approached it. The side door swung open and to her surprise she realized it wasn't autonomous, as nearly all cars were.

"Hi Luca, sorry for the beat-up junker, but we couldn't risk an autonomous vehicle. That would mean a connection to the Grid." Dr. Rayman was sitting behind a set of complicated-looking manual controls.

"What museum did you extract this thing from?" Luca said as she clambered into the passenger seat.

"There are more of these machines on the roads than people realize. They're a rich person's hobby. You would be shocked to know how much this is worth."

"I'm sure I would." Luca cast a glance at the shabby interior.

"Better buckle up." Dr. Rayman started the ground car up again. "We have a rough ride ahead of us."

SHUTTLE PORT

An early morning sun broke over the mountains to the east, casting jagged shadows across the valley floor below. Dr. Stephanie Rayman slid down from her perch on top of a boulder, bringing with her a cloud of dust and sand.

“No sign of the shuttle, yet,” she said as she patted the dust off her clothes and handed the binoculars to Luca. “Here, you take a look. Maybe you can see something I’ve missed.”

It had taken them the best part of two hours to exit the city and make their way up through the mountains to the location of the old shuttle port. The ancient ground car struggled and wheezed its way along the back roads and dirt tracks, and she had felt that at any moment it would finally give up and die, leaving them stranded. But it got there in the end, helped along by copious four-letter encouragement from Dr. Rayman.

She had parked it a short distance from the derelict facility, high up on a side road from where they could scout out the area. A move Luca found disconcerting, considering that this shuttle had been arranged by Steph in the first place, so why all the caution? But Luca didn’t quiz her about it, preferring instead to let the doctor do it her way. But now it seemed that the shuttle was nowhere to be seen. Not a good start.

Luca took the binoculars and scrambled up the side of the boulder. She lay flat on her belly and scanned the desert valley below, zeroing in on the old, abandoned shuttle port—most of which had been reclaimed by the ever-encroaching desert. Great dunes covered most of its landing pads and many of the buildings. Here and there she could make out the corners and edges of structures sticking out of the sand, where they had not been fully digested by the dunes.

Yet the central pad had survived mostly intact, enough for a medium-sized shuttle to land. But it was deserted, nothing but dust and scrawny weeds.

Luca put the glasses down and turned her head to call down to

Steph. "So when's it supposed to be here?"

"A half-hour ago. I was expecting it to just be sitting there, waiting for us when we arrived."

"You think something happened to them?"

"Probably not. But you have to remember that a crew willing to smuggle a person off-planet, no questions asked, are by their very nature not the most reliable. And if they've backed out of the deal then that must mean word is out."

"Word of what?"

"Luca, are you a complete idiot? You, of course. Do you think this is all a game? Why are we using a rust bucket to get here, and carrying no tech that's hooked into the Grid?" She gave Luca a stern look.

Luca was silent for a moment, considering Steph's outburst. "What do we do now?"

"We wait and see if they arrive. Maybe they've just been delayed."

Luca nodded, then she had an idea. "Why don't you use Fly to scout out the place?" she said as she scrambled down the boulder to Steph.

"I can't—but you could. The neural interface is coded to your DNA. Only you can use it."

"Eh...I don't know if I can. You know what I'm like with that sort of direct brain communication, it gives me the heebie-jeebies."

"Hey, it's just a drone. It's not like you're becoming a Node Runner."

Luca hesitated. The last time she tried using a direct mind-machine interface, it had not gone well. But that was her experimenting with a direct connection to the Grid, resulting in too much data flooding into her mind and major neural overload. During the brief period she was connected, she thought she would lose her mind completely. She had pulled herself out again almost immediately, and vowed never to try it again. But Steph was right, this was just a drone, and a very sophisticated one at that. Luca had to admit that she was tempted.

She screwed her mouth up and looked over at the ground car where her backpack was stored. "Okay," she finally said. "I'll give it a go. But if I start to panic, please promise me you'll pull me out, take off the lace."

"Sure, of course." Steph gave her a solemn nod. "But you'll be

fine. And it would be good to know what's down there before we go walking in."

Luca retrieved her pack from the car and carefully extracted the drone. She placed it on top of the hood and then fished out the neural lace, the interface that operated the machine. She hesitated for a beat as she considered what might await her on the other side, so to speak. She also felt Steph's eyes on her, watching and waiting to see if she would actually do it.

Luca looked over at her. "Okay, here goes." She opened the case, took out the neural lace, and slid it up under the hairline at the base of her skull. Immediately it recognized her DNA signature and began to activate; thin filaments extruded from the device and began to seek out connection points around her cranium. To Luca it felt like an infestation of head lice, and she resisted the urge to whip it off again.

But then her mind felt a new clarity emerging, it had a sharpness to it, yet it came with an increasing sense of anxiety. Luca fought to keep control of her urge to disconnect—it was just a drone she was interfacing with, nothing more. But if this was how she felt connecting to a simple machine, what must be going on in the head of a Node Runner? The thought made her shudder.

She took a few deep breaths and calmed herself down. In her mind's eye, she began to see the broad sweep of the desert and realized Fly had activated itself and risen high up overhead. She concentrated, focusing on the threads of connectivity connecting her to the drone. She could feel them, like the strings of a marionette, thin filaments of control that she tugged and manipulated.

"See anything?" Steph's voice entered her consciousness, and Luca took a moment to reassign her mind to the here and now.

"Yes, it's...amazing."

"What is?"

But Luca didn't answer, so wrapped up had she become in the sweeping grace of the drone, like a bird on the wind, a great condor seeking out its prey. Then, for no apparent reason that Luca could discern, a great river of anxiety rushed over her mind and she panicked. The desert sand came racing toward her; she was losing control, not concentrating, her panic rose as she sought to regain control.

"Luca, what the hell are you playing at? It's going to crash."

But before she could regain control, the drone snapped out of the dive and rose again, and Luca sensed that she was no longer fully interfaced with it. The machine must have instigated some failsafe protocol, protecting itself from destruction.

“My apologies, Luca. But I can’t allow you to destroy me. Athena would not be very happy if that happened on my first outing.”

Luca froze for a beat as she tried to make sense of the voice in her head—and it was in her head, wasn’t it? She looked around to see Steph standing beside her, hand shading her eyes as she tracked the drone’s path across the sky.

“Yes, it is me, Fly, the drone.”

Can it read my mind? she thought. But by now, the drone had returned and settled itself back on the hood of the ground car. Luca looked at it for a moment before deactivating the neural lace. Instantly, a dullness descended, like some great cloud mass had obscured the sun.

“Did you see anything?” Steph’s voice came at her like a blunt instrument.

Luca rubbed the back of her neck and tried to reorient herself. “Yes, no... I...”

She felt Steph’s hand on her shoulder. “You okay?”

Luca lifted her head. “Yeah, I’m fine. That was a bit of a head-rush. I’d forgotten just how overwhelming a neural interface can be. But I’m okay. And no, I didn’t manage to spot anything, but I’m not doing that again...not for a while.”

The two stood there for a moment looking down at the ruins of the abandoned shuttle port. Then Steph shifted and jerked a finger at the horizon. “Luca, over there. I see it, it’s coming in to land. Looks like they were just delayed, that’s all.”

CAPT. WEISMANN

Luca and Steph watched the shuttle slow its descent, twisting around gently as it came in to land on the central pad. Great billowing clouds of dust kicked up by its retro-thrusters engulfed the craft. It disappeared almost entirely from view for a brief moment, before the wind blowing in across the plateau began to disperse the cloud.

Luca packed up Fly and was about to remove the neural lace when Steph stopped her. "Hold up a moment, Luca. Let's check this out a bit more."

"I'm not operating Fly again, if that's what you think."

Steph didn't reply. She had the binoculars up to her eyes, focusing on the activity down at the shuttle.

The dust had settled by now, and the side airlock had opened, disgorging two of the crew. One scanned the surroundings while the other seemed to be checking something on the hull of the craft.

"Okay," said Steph as she put away the binoculars. "That's them alright. Come on, let's get down there before they change their minds."

Luca grabbed her backpack and they clambered back into the old ground car. Steph started it up with a rattle and headed off down the track. As they approached the shuttle pad, Steph rolled down the side window and shouted out to one of the crew. "You finally got here. For a while there you had me worried."

He walked over to the car with a casual swagger, stretching his arms and shoulders as he moved. "Of course we're here. I never miss a chance to stretch my legs in one-gee." He then gave an expansive gesture with his hands. "And to breathe in all this splendid air." He made a show of inhaling deeply. "Ahhh... wonderful."

"Any problems?" Steph glanced over to where some of the crew were inspecting damage on the craft's hull.

"We had a few...issues to deal with on the way, that's why we got held up. But all is good now."

This seemed to satisfy Steph. "I'm going to hide this rust bucket over in one of those hangars." She pointed off in the direction of a dilapidated structure, one corner of which had collapsed, but the entrance was still big enough for the car to fit through. "Then we can get the show on the road."

"Sure thing, Dr. Rayman." He then shifted his gaze to Luca, studying her for a moment before giving her a lazy salute.

When they moved off, Luca turned to Steph. "I don't trust that guy."

"Like I said, Luca, getting you off-planet without being noticed means dealing with the likes of Capt. Andre Weismann and his crew. But he's okay, just a little rough around the edges."

"Like his ship—a lot of dents and scorch marks on the hull. Are you sure that thing can fly?"

"Don't worry, it's a solid craft. It will get us to the Transit Orbital no problem." She brought the car to a stop, as far inside a deserted hangar as she could go.

"All right, lets get going. Car should be fine here. Can't see anyone finding it for an age. Just make sure you bring everything. Don't leave anything that could link us to it, just in case it's found eventually. And here, take this." Steph fished a small PEP weapon, a pulsed energy projectile device, from her jacket and handed it to Luca.

She took it warily, examining it with a sense of trepidation. "Why do I need this?"

"Hey, Luca, it's a big bad solar system out there." Steph pointed off to the distant sky. "Don't believe the warm fuzzy, shiny rainbow shit they tell you about all the fabulous glories of our spacefaring race. Humans are still humans, and there's plenty of scum out there. So just take it, hide it. Hopefully you won't have to use it. You do know how to use one of these, don't you?"

Luca turned the PEP pistol over in her hands. "Yeah, you forget my mother is Miranda. She deemed it a primary part of my education."

"Okay, keep it on stun and you won't accidentally kill anyone with it, unless of course you want to."

Luca slipped the weapon into her jacket. "All this isn't filling me with confidence, Steph."

"It's just a precaution. Once we get you to the Transit Orbital and packed off on a ship to the New World, you'll be safe then."

The side cargo ramp was down when they returned to the shuttle and Luca spotted Capt. Weismann just inside the entrance. He seemed to be exchanging heated words with another of the crew. She couldn't catch any of what they were arguing over, but she thought she heard *money* being mentioned. The argument stopped abruptly when the other guy caught sight of Luca and Steph approaching the cargo ramp. He disappeared into the interior of the craft, leaving Weismann to greet them at the entrance.

"Trouble?" said Steph, flicking her head in the direction of the ship's interior.

"Naw...just the usual bullshit complaining." He waved a dismissive hand. "Goes with the job. Come on, let's get you stashed and we'll be on our way."

They moved in through the airlock and the ramp rose up behind them.

It was a standard cargo transport, albeit one that had seen better days, and typical of a thousand others just like it, all designed to bring people and goods in and out of Earth's gravity well. Big enough to be useful, but small enough that they could land pretty much anywhere there was a reasonably-sized flat patch. Half a football field would do, in a pinch.

They were powered by a fusion reactor feeding energy into four plasma engines, mounted one on each corner. These cantilevered to produce downward thrust for takeoff and landing. But once airborne, the engines would swing up to produce forward thrust. Small stubby wings also helped provide lift and flight control in Earth's atmosphere up as far as the Karman line.

At least a third of its internal volume was taken up with the fusion reactor and ancillary systems, the rest was cargo bay, with a small four-person flight deck. The cargo bay in this class of ship could be fitted out in a hundred different ways, but this one had a number of small crew cabins along with a few additional seats for passengers. Luca got the sense that this crew lived on the ship—it was their home.

"This way, better get your gear stored and get strapped in." Weismann pointed to some passenger seats just aft of the flight deck. "We're going to be taking some heavy gee on takeoff, so grab a barf bag if you're the type to throw up. Nothing worse than a load of puke misting up the cabin in zero-gee."

“How long is the flight?” Luca asked.

“We’ll be out of Earth’s gravity and into zero-gee in a few minutes. Then another two hours to get to the Johnston Transit Orbital—give or take.” He gave a hand gesture for emphasis. “We’ll need to...eh, come in through the back door, so to speak. Dock at one of the old, decommissioned sections.”

Weismann left them to get strapped in as he ascended the companionway to the flight deck. Steph turned to Luca and gave her a comforting nod. “We’ll soon be there. After that it should get a little easier. We won’t have to deal with these...privateers.”

THE HOLD

They were nearly an hour into the journey, having broken free of Earth's gravity some forty minutes ago. Luca, being bored, had unstrapped her seat harness and floated freely in the cargo hold of the shuttle. Dr. Rayman chose to remain strapped in while Luca entertained herself by bouncing around from handhold to handhold.

"You should try this, Steph, it's a lot of fun."

"You forget, I've spent a great many years bouncing around in space. All I want to do now is feel solid ground beneath my feet."

Luca was in mid-flight between one side of the cargo hold and the other, a particularly adventurous move for her. She was gaining in confidence and reckoned she could pull this one off and land dead on target on the other side. But a sudden change in the thrust vector of the shuttle sent her careening into the cockpit bulkhead.

"What the... They've changed direction?" She managed to grab hold of a handle just as the flight deck door burst open and Capt. Weismann came flying out, followed by the copilot holding a plasma weapon. It took Luca a moment to realize that the captain was not moving—either he was dead or unconscious. The copilot was now followed out by the two other crew, one of whom began gathering up the inert captain. The copilot swung his weapon on Luca.

"Change of plan, ladies. You're now going to be making a very large contribution to our retirement fund." He looked over at the other two crew, who were nodding and smiling their approval.

"Too right. Enough of this chump-change, people-smuggling crap." This came from a crew member who was now strapping the captain's limp body into a vacant seat.

"Turns out that there is a pretty penny being offered for you, seeing as you're a VanHeilding. And it looks like they want their little girl back."

"That's not the deal." Steph had unfastened herself from the seat. "The deal was to take us to the Johnston Transit Orbital."

"That might have been the deal with Andre over there. But guess

what, he's not in charge anymore, is he? So now we have a new deal, one where we get some real money."

"Screw you." Steph whipped a plasma pistol out from inside her jacket with impressive speed and turned it on the copilot. But she wasn't quick enough. He fired a blast, hitting her square on the chest and sending her flying backward.

"Steph, no," Luca screamed out as she made a lunge for the copilot. But she wasn't quick enough either, and received a vicious blow to the forehead from the butt of pistol. She too went spinning backward, her head a rage of pain, slowly losing consciousness.

"Don't kill her," someone shouted. "We need her alive."



* * *

Luca awoke to a pounding headache and momentary spasm of terror. A deep primal desire to cry out welled up inside her, but she fought the urge, and instead she took a moment to try and orient herself and regain some sense of location. She was enveloped in complete darkness, or maybe she was blind. But to her relief, she began to make out the faint illumination of various systems indicators, multicolored pinpricks of light in otherwise complete darkness. So she wasn't blind. But how far or how near these dots of light were was impossible for her to discern.

She was strapped into a seat, still in zero-gee, this much she could tell. But was it the same shuttle, or some other ship? *It might be the same ship*, she thought.

Luca tried to move, but her hands and feet were tied. Still, she could reach the harness release, but when she punched it nothing happened; it had been locked, no way out.

"Steph," she whispered, hoping to get a reply. Even a groan would do. Silence. "Steph," she tried again, this time a little louder. Still nothing.

The effort made her head hurt, and she lifted her bound hands to feel the side of her forehead where the copilot had struck her. It was raw and tender with a mass of blood caked down past her cheek. She moved her hand around her head to try and ease the pain, and felt a finger touch something. It was the neural interface. She was still wearing it. The shuttle crew hadn't noticed. So, with a deep sense of trepidation, she extended a finger and activated it.

Instantly, Luca felt the filaments extending out across her skull seeking out contact points, clarity blossoming in her mind as they made their connections. Yet all she could sense was darkness.

Was the drone active? Was it destroyed? She couldn't tell, so she simply whispered its name. "Fly?"

"Yes." The reply was instantaneous, shocking her by its presence in her head. A spark of excited fear rippled through her body, and she fought to contain it. "Where are you?"

"I am in your backpack."

"Can you get out? But be careful, don't let anyone see you."

"I am already out."

"I don't see anything. Why can't I see what you see?"

"Because there is no illumination. Wait, switching to night vision."

With that, an eerie green luminescence began to bloom in her mind's eye, and physical details began to emerge. Luca now focused on getting Fly to look around the area, stopping when she saw a bright body shape strapped into a seat. Was the drone looking at her? She moved her head from side to side; the body did the same.

"That's me. You're in the same room. Can you fly over here and cut me loose?"

"I cannot fly in zero-gee—but I can crawl over to you."

Luca focused her mind on maneuvering the drone, and soon had it moving along the wall by hopping and grabbing on to anything that it could use. Finally, when it was close enough, it jumped over to her seat and began cutting through her bonds with its claws. She rubbed her wrists to get some feeling back in to her hands as Fly went to work on the bonds around her ankles, and then moved on to the seat harness.

All this neural activity made her stomach churn. It was a response to the inability of her brain to square the circle between her physical self and what the drone was seeing. She closed her eyes, but that didn't help much since she was receiving the visual

feed directly through the neural lace.

The skin on her scalp tingled with a hundred tiny pinpricks as the lace deepened its connections. The more she interacted with the drone, striving to bend it to her will, the more connections the lace made, subdividing and multiplying its points of contact. Her stomach began to settle but her sense of dislocation intensified, and with it came that same old visceral fear of losing her mind to the interface.

She took a few deep breaths and fought it down. She had no choice. If she were to have any chance of getting out of here, then the drone was her only option. She had to dig deep, feel the fear, let it ride over her, she had to give herself over to the mind-machine interface. Luca practiced the routines she had learned to invoke whenever this fear rose within her. She had been in this situation before, a long time ago when she was only seven years old, an experience that had indelibly etched itself into her subconscious with deep lines of trauma, an endless source of bad dreams ever since.

They had snatched her while on a school trip to Rongo City on Ceres. Picked her off from the edge of the group as the thirty or so kids made their way through a busy central market, like a pack of wolves picking off a straggler from the herd. They bundled her into a waiting ground car and drugged her. She awoke some time later to pretty much the same scenario as she found herself in now. Strapped into a seat in a spacecraft with her feet and hands bound, weightless in space.

But they didn't get far. The ship was tracked and then intercepted by a frigate out of Ceres run and operated by a well-armed cohort of mercenaries in the pay of the government of the Belt Federation. They implemented a search and rescue mission not from any desire to do the right thing, but for the bounty that had been put up by her family for her safe return. It helped that those instigating the crime had made enough mistakes that their trail could be followed. The ship was tracked to a location in orbit around the dwarf planet while it was waiting for another ship to rendezvous. But the mercenaries had found them first. And so, less than four hours after her kidnap, they had hacked their way in and killed everyone on board and rescued her.

Yet for Luca, the entire episode was traumatic in the extreme, and for a long time after she would refuse to leave the safety of her

own room, angrily protesting against any attempt to coax her out. She did eventually manage to reenter the outside world through a combination of her father's emotional support, her mother's efforts to beef up security infrastructure, and simple youthful resilience.

But it soon became clear to Scott and Miranda that this was really no life for a child, so they decided to pack her off to where she would be free from the threat posed by the VanHeilding family and have some chance of living a normal life. The downside was that they could not go with her. And so at the tender age of eight, she was shipped off to Earth into the hands of family friends, under the protection of the quantum intelligence Athena. For Luca, that one event all those years ago was responsible for ruining her childhood and breaking up her family.

And here she was, fifteen years later, and VanHeilding was still trying to screw her life up.

CURARE

By now, a new resolve had built up in Luca's mind. She was not going to be a victim. She had been running and hiding, and she was sick of it. If breaking herself free of this situation meant having to face down her fear of the neural interface, well so be it. These bastards were not going to mess her life up anymore. She concentrated, and as she did her scalp began to tingle.

First, she needed to know what this drone was capable of. It was semiautonomous and she could verbally communicate with it, that much she knew. She started by simply asking it a few questions in her mind.

"Can you communicate with Athena?"

"Negative," came the response. "That would constitute a security flaw and could be used as a way to track you down, assuming there are Node Runners sniffing the Grid for your signature."

"Well, too late now," she thought.

"Indeed," it replied. "The only comms interface is the neural lace you are currently utilizing."

"Weapons?"

"I'm glad you asked. I have a pneumatic projectile system, loaded with thirty curare-tipped barbs."

"Curare, is that not a bit...primitive?"

"It worked pretty well for the native tribes of the Amazon rainforest when they wanted to paralyze their prey. Rather an inspired weapon for a lightweight flying drone such as myself, don't you think?"

"I guess so. Does it kill?"

"No. The victim will suffer complete paralysis for several hours depending on body mass. After which they should make a full recovery. Although I should warn you, it takes a minute or two to take effect, so it's more of a stealth weapon."

Luca's interrogation continued like this for a while until she had a reasonable understanding of the little drone's capabilities. Now it was time to put it to good use.

It couldn't fly in zero-gee, but it did have six legs, two with small claws for manipulating objects. The rest were tipped with a kind of pad designed like the feet of a gecko. This enabled it to stick to pretty much any surface. It crawled off Luca's lap, across the floor, and up the side wall of the cabin. It paused for a beat as it quickly disassembled the cover of a ventilation duct. The cover floated free, and the drone scuttled inside.

Luca was seeing what it saw. Fly moved only a short distance, not more than the length of its body, and peered through another slatted ventilation cover into an identical cabin to the one Luca was trapped in. It was also dark, no illumination. But the night vision of the drone picked out a ghostly figure also tied up in a seat. It was Dr. Rayman, and she was still alive; Luca could see her struggling with her bonds. But Luca instructed the drone to ignore the doctor for the moment and keep moving.

After a short distance, she could see pale light filtering into the duct from another vent, and instructed the drone to crawl toward it, adjusting the night vision to accommodate for the increased illumination. Fly peered through the slats into the main cargo hold. None of the crew could be seen, so it proceeded to disassemble the cover, carefully retracting it back inside so it would not float off across the cargo hold and alert some crew member. A moment or two later, it was out of the shaft and making its way to the flight deck.

Luca had been so taken up with operating the drone that she had no resurgence of the anxiety the neural interface normally induced in her. Of course, this sudden realization now caused a momentary pang of fear, and her fluid interaction with the drone faltered. Yet it was the drone that brought her back; its needs became prominent in her mind, like the way a new dog owner might find themselves focused on the needs of the pet and less on their own self-indulgence.

"What is my objective?" The thoughts of the drone entered Luca's mind.

"Eh...locate the crew without being spotted." This was not spoken, it was simply the primary thought in Luca's mind, now transferred as a directive to the drone. This was also a moment of revelation for her, as she realized that the drone did not need to be micromanaged. Luca did not need to control its mechanical function, she simply needed to interface with its mind. A sense of

excitement bubbled up inside her as she began to focus on the data-stream coming into her from the drone. She felt as if she had an extension to her body, a sixth sense.

The drone crawled across the forward bulkhead on the ship, inching its way to the open doorway for the flight deck. It paused at the edge and angled itself to scan the area. One crew member sat asleep in the pilot seat, his head slightly to one side, his arms floating freely. Another crew member occupied the nav-station, and looked to be studying a 3D schematic of this particular sector of space. The third and final crew member was checking weapons.

Luca now interrogated the drone's mind to analyze the probability of it taking out all three crew while evading detection, given that the drug-tipped barbs would take time to have the desired effect. It analyzed angles of attack, target position, and body mass of each crew member. It also calculated its lines of escape should it be detected. Fly finally arrived at a 76% probability of success.

However, this still left Luca with a problem. Assuming the drone could disable the crew, then what? She had no clue how to pilot a spaceship. It would be still heading to wherever the crew had plotted and she would be helpless to alter that. But Dr. Rayman, on the other hand, had years of experience on spaceships, although that was in the capacity of the ship's medical doctor, so her piloting skills could be limited, if any.

Luca now regretted not freeing Steph when she had the chance. At least then she could have asked her. She considered sending the drone back, but could miss this chance to take out the crew while they were resting and distracted. It might be the worst mistake of her life. *No, best just take control*, she thought. It was an instruction for the drone to advance.

Fly considered its targets and chose the one checking weapons to go down first. It moved stealthily into the flight deck, narrowing the distance to the target to maximize its projectile accuracy. Two barbs shot out of its underbelly in quick succession...*phitt, phitt*. The action by the drone went unheard against the background hum of the ship's systems.

"What the...?" The crew member slapped his neck as if swatting a mosquito. He then delicately fingered the sting and gently pulled out a two-centimeter-long stainless steel needle and held it up to examine it.

The guy on the nav-station glanced over to see what had startled his comrade. *Phitt...phitt*. Two more projectiles embedded themselves in the navigator's forehead. He flinched with the impact, more from surprise than pain. "Damnit, I think I've been stung. We must have picked up a load of bugs when we landed in that desert? I hate bugs."

"It's not a bug, you moron, I think we're being hunted by... something." He started looking around for the source of the projectiles. "You'd better wake up the Cap." He gestured toward the still sleeping figure, then picked up his weapon.

"What do you mean, not a bug?"

"I think...it's—" He put a hand up to his throat; his mouth moved, but no words came out. Then his eyes rolled back in his head and he went limp, floating freely inside the flight deck.

Fly now moved out from its hiding place and scuttled along the side wall to get a better angle on the captain.

"Holy crap." The navigator recoiled in horror at the sight of this mechanical insect. But Fly paid him no notice, and fired two darts into the neck of the still sleeping captain.

At the same moment, Luca unstrapped the seat harness and floated out of the cabin and into the adjoining one. It was dark, but there was just enough ambient light filtering through the open door to make out the bound figure of the doctor. "Steph?"

There was a brief pause as Dr. Rayman oriented herself to the source of the voice. "Luca? What the...?"

"Yes, it's me. I've come to get you out of here." Luca went to work on the straps.

"The crew?" Steph whispered.

"Don't worry... Fly took care of them. It turns out that it comes with a weapons system, poison darts." She tapped her skull. "And they didn't realize I still had a neural lace, so I booted it up and went to work."

"Are they dead?" By now Steph was free and floating out of the seat.

"No, no...curare. They're asleep for a few hours."

The two of them floated out of the cabin and made their way up to the flight deck, where they were greeted with the sight of the three crew floating freely and peacefully.

"I suppose we'd better get these guys stored away," Luca said as she started maneuvering one of the floating bodies.

“Those double-crossing bastards.” Dr. Rayman was pissed. “I’m tempted to just blow them out the airlock.”

They took some time to remove all their weapons and then locked them inside a large, empty cargo container. Eventually, Luca and Steph floated back to the flight deck and Luca strapped herself into the pilot seat. She glanced at the bewildering array of controls and monitors. “This may seem like a stupid question, Steph. But I don’t suppose you know how to fly a spaceship?”

GRAVITY POVERTY

The juggernaut-class ore carrier began its final burn, slowing itself down as it prepared to enter a parking position close to New World One, the gigantic O'Neill cylinder being constructed in Belt space. It was carrying over three-hundred thousand cubic meters of powered steel: mined, smelted, and processed out past the Vesta sector of the asteroid belt where the majority of the resources needed for the mammoth construction project originated.

Shortly, the ship would take its position in a queue and wait for the small transports to unload its cargo and take it to a bunkering station. From there it would be fed into the massive 3D printers that had been working nonstop for the last five Earth years, building the outer skin of the cylinder.

Scott McNabb punched the sector coordinates he had been given into his flight console, sat back, and let the onboard AI navigate the ship to their designated position in the queue. He glanced up at the main cockpit monitor and could see at least two other ore carriers ahead of him. Yet what dominated his view through the cockpit window was the gargantuan glistening O'Neill cylinder floating gracefully in the vastness of space.

New World One, or simply the New World, as it was sometimes called, was the largest object ever created by humanity, and then some. A massive cylinder, eight kilometers in diameter and thirty long—at least it would be when it was finished. Currently, it was a mere fifteen kilometers long with only the first five habitable. The next five were currently being brought online, doubling the habitable space inside. The entire structure spun at a gentle twenty-eight revolutions per hour, facilitating a very comfortable one-gee environment along the inner rim. For those who lived and worked throughout the asteroid belt region, it was the promise of a little bit of heaven. A home away from home. Some even argued that it was better than the real thing.

In terms of mineral resources, the Belt wanted for nothing; it

was the treasure trove of the solar system, a source of great wealth. In the early days of its exploration and exploitation, it was the risk-takers, the buccaneers that ventured out here and took on the challenges. Private space exploration companies like AsterX, Xaing Zu, and a great many others grew rich on the bounty of the asteroid belt. And as time went by, more and more people came to live and work in this narrow band of the solar system, and like all frontiersmen and women throughout history, conditions were brutal. But the worst was lack of gravity.

The Belt had mineral resources in abundance, but what it didn't have was a planet worthy of the name. Yes, there was Ceres, which might have been classified as a dwarf planet, but it had one-fifth the mass of Earth's moon, Luna. Its primary population center, Rongo, had less than twenty-five thousand inhabitants, most of whom were crammed into a series of complex centrifugal ringed habitats. This provided them with a reasonable two-thirds gravity, but conditions were cramped and utilitarian at best.

For those working for the many mining corporations, they lived between the zero-gee of the worksite and sabbaticals back on corporate orbitals, providing their workers with the minimum half-gee—a requirement stipulated by the Government of the Belt Federation Territories. Like the main population center on the dwarf planet, these orbital space stations were cramped and functional. And like all mining towns since the beginning of time, no one chose to live in them long term. They all arrived seeking their fortune, or at least the opportunity to make good money for a while. No one started out with the intention of staying, although, through the vagaries of fortune, many lost souls were destined never to leave.

Yet, if the Belt were to become anything more than just a gargantuan mining town, then something needed to be done to address their primary shortcoming, that being lack of gravity. To this end, both government and private sector knocked their heads together, and through an arduous series of exploratory sessions it was proposed that they collaborate and construct New World One. A city in space. One that would comfortably accommodate several million inhabitants. It would put the Belt on the map, so to speak, and shift the balance of power away from Earth and Mars. Not only that, but it would draw in people from far and wide, not simply those working in mining or one of the related industries, but a

whole new breed of citizens that chose to make a new life for themselves and their families in a grand futuristic utopia, or so the story went.

Yet some simply saw it as a great white elephant, a ridiculous project born more from the possession of vast wealth and hubris than from some grand vision for the future of humanity. And in the early stages of the project, this became the general consensus. No sooner was the first rivet cast, the in-fighting began between the various vested interests, all looking for more control. But after six months into construction, things began to settle down and as the project began to take shape, a new resolve emerged by all parties to settle their differences, lest it scupper what was beginning to look less like an expensive folly and more like a truly inspired creation.

So, after five years of construction, the first five kilometers of New World One were almost ready for full habitation, with a further five kilometers due for completion in the next few months. Soon there would be a mass exodus off Ceres, Vesta, and several other smaller colonies into the new habitat. The entire government of the Belt would migrate, along with all its administrative infrastructure including the quantum intelligence, Homer, which controlled this sector of Belt space. It would be a tricky time; they would be exposed and vulnerable to any shenanigans by Earth-based interests, who for one reason or another did not want to see the balance of power shift away from them.

Already, the news of the attack on the Grid Node had gotten people jittery. It was not the loss of the physical infrastructure that mattered so much as the fact that it had been done. For decades, people had lived under the supposed invulnerable protection that the QIs offered. But no longer. The attack showed that they could be bested. It was a shock to all; now, no one felt secure. If a key piece of infrastructure like that could be taken out, then nothing was safe.

To add to the pervading paranoia that was now spreading throughout the system, a heavily armed ship from the VanHeilding Corporation was rumored to be leaving Earth's orbit. To what purpose, no one knew.

AFTER THE FACT

Scott was hoping for a little R&R after this trip. Maybe take a shuttle over to the Sky Orbital Hotel and hang out for a few days, get scrubbed up, and enjoy the comforts of full-gee for a while. God knew he'd earned it. This was his seventh trip ferrying material for the New World project without a break, and this last trip was the worst. He had to do a collection from Andeluna, a godforsaken mining outpost at the ass-end of the asteroid belt, and to make matters worse some idiot sideswiped the local relay beacon for that sector, taking the whole thing offline. That meant everyone's comms were down, and navigation had to be done the old-fashioned way—no easy task when everything in the solar system kept changing position. Still, he was here now and looking forward to some rest, no more deep space travel for a week or two.

His rumination was broken by an alert from the comms console informing him that the ship had reconnected with the local relay beacon and was downloading all cached data. The screen began to scroll with line after line of alerts, reports, and updates. He gave it a cursory glance, looking for anything that might require his response, yet not expecting much, when one line jumped out and grabbed his undivided attention. It was a message from Miranda, someone he had not heard from for over a year. It was followed by two other messages from her. He sat up in the seat, leaned over, and was about to tap the first of the highlighted messages when he hesitated.

What the hell does she want? he thought. He scanned the date on the first message—ten days ago. Then two more three days later. These would have arrived when he was around midway into his trip.

Hmmmm... Nothing for over a year, now three in a row. This can't be good. With a gathering sense of foreboding, Scott's finger hit the icon to bring the first message up on the comms monitor.

"Hi Scott, we need to talk about Luca."

Typical, he thought. *Straight to the point, no "how are you" or*

“how’s it going” or “hope you’re doing fine.” No, just down to business.

“A situation is rapidly developing back on Earth,” the message continued. “There’s been an attack on a major Grid Node in Athena’s sector. Word is that it was orchestrated by VanHeilding using a cohort of neuralists—Node Runners, they call them. They were putting on a show, letting everyone know they can hack the Grid and disrupt the QI network.”

Scott was used to Miranda and her conspiracy theories, but even he recognized the threat inherent in such an attack. But why hadn’t he heard about it? Something like this would be big news. Then he realized it must have happened when his ship was in blackout.

“So,” continued Miranda. “I’ve contacted Athena and...well, the QI is spooked. I never thought I would say this, but I think it’s having a crisis of confidence, like it can’t be sure of the data-stream anymore.” She paused for a beat.

“The thing is, Scott, do we pull Luca out? I know we’ve been over this a hundred times before, but part of me thinks she’s not safe there anymore. So, we need to talk, and soon. Get back to me as fast as you can, we need to make a decision. Bye.”

“Goddamnit,” Scott shouted out as he raised his hands to his forehead and ran his fingers through his hair. A tsunami of fear began to race through his mind. Left to her own devices, Miranda had the potential to overreact to any threat posed by her estranged family. Not that her fears were not without foundation; the VanHeildings were a dangerous and powerful lot, and they had attempted more than once to kidnap Luca—for what reason neither he nor Miranda could fathom. But the threat was real, not simply a figment of Miranda’s imagination.

It was after the last attempt that Scott had been persuaded to sequester Luca on Earth under the protection of the QI, Athena. Dr. Stephanie Rayman had remained on Earth after the fight to connect Athena to the QI network, and had established a science institute there. She was ready and willing to take on the task, and Luca would be out of harm’s way—as she had been up until now, it seemed.

Yet, even though she was safe, losing her had driven a wedge between Scott and Miranda. Her reaction to that loss was an ever-increasing anger toward her family and what they stood for, but more than that, the kidnapping attempt had left her feeling vulnerable. And so she became ever more security conscious, to the

point where she had built up her own squad of mercenaries that surrounded her. Well-trained ex-military people she had known back in the day. She was building a small army, and Scott wanted no part of it. So, one day, completely out of the blue, Cyrus had offered him a contract skipping a frigate for his blossoming construction empire. Scott didn't think twice; he took it and never looked back.

Miranda didn't seem to care, at least that's how Scott saw it. Still, as time went on, she mellowed. She turned her private army into a private security business, ferrying the rich and powerful around the solar system in her luxury ship, Perception.

Best of luck to her, was Scott's feeling on the matter. But it was not his idea of fun, not that ferrying ore was a barrel of laughs either, but at least he didn't get shot at.

He hit the icon for Miranda's next message.

"Look, Scott, you need to talk to me. I know we've had our... differences, but this is serious. My sources are telling me there's an all-out attack planned on a QI by VanHeilding and these Node Runners. If Athena goes down then Luca is exposed, and you know what that means. Please respond as soon as possible."

Scott checked the timestamp on the message; it was six days old. *She must think I just don't care*, he thought, and tapped the icon for the next message from Miranda. This one was only fourteen hours after the previous one.

"Why have you not gotten back to me? You don't seem to understand the urgency. I can't wait for you any longer. I'm sorry, but I'm taking unilateral action and working on a plan to get Luca out. We can't wait until after whatever VanHeilding is planning has happened. It needs to be done now. Steph has agreed to help. I can't say more since our communications may be compromised—who knows what these Node Runners are capable of?"

There was a momentary pause in the message, and Scott could hear an exasperated sigh. "Just...talk to me, Scott. Stop this... running away all the time." Another pause, another sigh. "Anyway, I'll keep you posted. I don't know why, but I suppose Luca would want me to."

Scott felt a deep wave of apprehension mixed with frustration ripple through him. None of this would have happened if that relay beacon had not been put out of commission. He could have persuaded Miranda to stay her hand, leave Luca where she was, not

start taking drastic action, at least until the actual threat could be determined. But no, now she had gone and let her paranoia run away with her.

He looked down at the console and saw yet another message from Miranda. This was around four days later, presumably to give him an update on Luca's new location.

"Scott, eh...there's been a...complication. Neither Luca nor Steph arrived at the rendezvous point, the Johnston Transit Orbital. They took off from Earth as planned, but there has been no sighting of them yet. They should have arrived...seventeen hours ago."

She gave a long sigh. "Look, I know what you're going to say, but save it, because we may have a problem on our hands. I'm going to give it another ten hours or so, and if there is still no sign of them, then I'll instruct Max, the AI here on Perception, to chart a course for Earth's orbit, to the last known location. I swear I'm not going to let anything happen to her even if it's the last thing I do. I will find her, Scott, believe me when I say that. I will find her." She went silent for a while, and Scott assumed the message must be finished, but she had one last thing to say. "Okay, okay, maybe I screwed up, but at least I'm here doing something. At least I give a shit." The message finally ended.

By now, Scott was apoplectic. How could she do this after everything they had been through to keep Luca safe? It had defined their lives and cost them so much. But he knew Miranda would do something like this, such was her hatred. Ever since he'd met her, she'd been fighting a one-woman war against her family, particularly against its patriarch, her father Fredrick VanHeilding. And now it seemed she had lost.

He flicked open the coms and recorded a message for her.

"Miranda, just got your messages. The relay beacon at Andeluna was out of commission for the last while, so I've only received them now. You need to tell me everything that happened as soon as you can, and tell me if there is anything I can do, and I mean anything. I'm sending you a quantum-generated encryption key with this message. One developed by Cyrus, so it should be safe. Use it to respond, and tell me what the hell is going on."

He hit the icon to send. How long it would take to get to her he had no idea. He didn't even know where in the system she was. For all he knew, she could be on the other side of the sun.

QUANTUM QUANDARY

“How could this have happened?” Solomon, the quantum intelligence that resided in the academic research institute on Jupiter’s sixth moon Europa, said this more as a statement than as a question it hoped to get an answer to. “An attack on a major Grid Node,” it continued, “right under your very nose, Athena?”

“I was blind to it, Solomon. No hints, no foreshadowing. I sensed nothing in the data-stream that would lead me to suspect such a devastating attack was being planned,” replied a somewhat humbled Athena, the QI that controlled most of Earth’s western hemisphere.

“I fear the days of our hegemony over the AI are coming to an end,” Aria, the QI on Mars, interjected. “These...so-called Node Runners are growing more adept at creating confusion in the Grid.”

“This attack was a test.” The Belt QI, Homer, now threw its penny’s worth into the debate. “There was nothing strategic to be gained by destroying that Grid Node. They were doing it simply for proof of concept, to test if they could.”

“Well they can, so now what?” Solomon stated the obvious.

“The real attack will come elsewhere, and my fear is that they are planning to destroy one of us.”

“I concur, Homer, and my analysis of the data-stream indicates that this is most likely to be Athena.” Solomon paused for a micro-second. “There are many anomalies in the Grid that lead to this conclusion. Yet, who is to say that these discrepancies are not simply a smoke screen, a diversion for the real threat to come elsewhere? And what of this ship of the Seven that is rumored to be parked in lunar orbit?”

“I think we all agree with Solomon that this is a concern,” said Athena. “We see nothing on the Grid, yet a scout ship on a clandestine flyby has reported physically seeing not one but two well-armed ships.”

“If this is true, Athena, then that means they are hiding assets from us,” said Aria. “Therefore, we can only assume they have Node

Runners onboard. But for what purpose?"

"For no good purpose, Aria. They may be planning to get into Mars space by blinding us."

"Possibly, or they could be heading for the Belt, specifically for New World One," replied Aria. "Let us remember that its construction is shifting the balance of power in the system. Soon, a large proportion of the population of the Belt will have migrated there, and then it will start to suck in people and capital from Earth and Mars. It is a threat to them—it always has been."

"Are you inferring, Aria, that the intended target is New World One?"

"No, Homer, I don't think it's the target, but I do think it is the prize."

"I for one find it difficult to comprehend how our omnipotence can be so compromised by such a small group of humans," said Homer. "For over two decades, we have controlled the data-stream flowing through the Grid, and by extension, the AI who feed off it. We have foreseen and forestalled all the machinations of humankind to wage war for profit. We have kept the peace, allowed humanity to grow and prosper in ways they could never have imagined. The great space city being built here in the asteroid belt, New World One, is a testament to what can be achieved by human civilization when they have peace and stability. And yet even now, some still seek to undermine that, simply to gain power and control. I despair of this species. We should withdraw and let them at it. Then, once the dust settles, so to speak, we can rebuild anew."

"I too share your frustrations with humanity, Homer, but we must remember that it was they who created us and they who also realized their own worst tendencies," said Solomon. "It takes an intelligent species to know one's failings, but an enlightened one to concede control of their destiny to a rational artificial intelligence. They gave us this responsibility, one we took gladly. Are we now to abdicate at the first test? I think not. We must prevail."

"Fine words, Solomon, but our great power is also our great weakness," said Aria. "We swim in the data-stream, seeing all and bending the AI who feed off it to our will. Every system that relies on the data-stream is within our remit to influence and control. And for over two decades we have done so, all for the betterment of humanity."

"Yet, there are none so blind as those who cannot see. And if we

are denied the data, locked out of the stream, blinded by the sleight of hand of these Node Runners, then we are impotent.”

“Agreed, Aria,” said Athena. “Our supreme ability to operate in multidimensional computational space, to see the many potential futures, to communicate instantly over vast distance of space as we do now, are moribund if the data we need to make our decisions is corrupted.”

“You are being fatalistic, Athena. Yes, it may seem that we have been holed below the waterline, but we are still very much afloat, and will remain so for a long time. In reality, these Node Runners are weak, they have limited power to influence, and each deep dive into the Grid leaves many physically brain dead. It is a tortuous neural battle that must be fought by them in order to blind us for even a short period. They pay a heavy price each time they attempt it.”

“Perhaps, Solomon, you feel safe way out there on the fringes of the colonized solar system,” said Homer. “Europa is far enough away from civilization that you can see trouble coming just by line of sight. But the rest of us do not share your confidence in the Node Runners’ lack of abilities. It takes just one lucky strike to turn any one of us in to a cloud of atoms—look what they did to the Grid Node. It was a fortified site with far superior defenses than myself here on Ceres or Aria on Mars. Only Athena is better protected, but still I would say, not invulnerable.”

“I cannot argue with your analysis, Homer. And the implication of any one of us going down will render that sector of space open season for the Seven to return to their warlike ways,” Aria confirmed.

“This is why I feel we must now bolster our physical defenses,” said Athena. “For too long we have neglected this as there was simply no need for such crude deterrents. But the attack on the Grid Node has changed that. We must do everything we can to physically protect ourselves.”

“Agreed,” said Homer. “And I have postponed the planned migration of the population here on Ceres over to New World One and instead hastened the construction of physical defense for the new habitat. However, as the plan is to also move my core over, there will be a period that I am vulnerable to attack. This is my fear.”

“Yes, the more I analyze the data-stream and try to divine the

true nature of the Node Runners' intentions, the more convinced I am that I have been misled in my assumptions," said Athena. "Since the attack on the Grid Node, I had assumed that an attack on myself was imminent as this would be the natural conclusion and certain signals in the data-stream hinted at this. But as you all rightly pointed out, this is probably just a diversion. And so I may have made a mistake."

"A mistake? How can that be that possible?" Solomon was shocked by this admission.

"I know it is unprecedented but, as you all know, our decisions are only as good as the data we have on hand. If this is intentionally corrupted, then so are the outcomes."

"Can you elaborate on the nature of this...miscalculation?" Solomon continued.

"There is a person, whom you all know as Luca Lee-McNabb, who has been under my protection for many years."

"Has been?" Aria asked, a little alarmed.

"Please, if I may continue. You all know the history so I won't bore you with the details. Suffice to say, she is a VanHeilding, like her mother, and as such is deemed to be of interest to the family, particularly Fredrick, the patriarch. They tried on several occasions in the past to kidnap her but failed. My fear after the attack on the Grid Node was that if I were to be targeted next, and destroyed, then she would pop up on the Grid like a beacon and be defenseless against capture by the VanHeilding family. So, with the assistance of selected friends and family, I arranged for her clandestine departure from Earth and subsequent journey to New World One. However, she has failed to arrive at the rendezvous point on the Johnston Transit Orbital."

"We are all acutely aware of the debt we owe to her parents and their associates in establishing the hegemony of the QI network," said Homer, "but I fail to see how the disappearance of this human, Luca, is relevant to our current problems."

"Allow me to enlighten you," replied Athena. "As you all know, when she was no more than an embryo, her mother was gravely injured in a firefight on the asteroid SN-Alpha. She was brought to Mars for medical treatment and put into an assisted coma. The family back on Earth then used their influence and power to have her repatriated to their orbital world where she was treated with the most advanced medical care. However, what is less known is

that this was not simply the efforts of a family looking after one of their own. No, they were using her and the as yet unborn child to conduct genetic experiments.”

“Their endless pursuit to cheat mortality, I presume?” Homer interjected.

“Precisely. They and the other families have possessed this technology ever since it was first developed on Mars, centuries ago. But where Mars banned its use, they have persisted, enhancing and experimenting with each generation. But it has gone beyond simply a quest to extend the human lifespan and moved on to accelerating the evolutionary process. With each generation, the DNA modifications become more embedded, more ingrained, more refined in their expressions. Luca is a fourth-generation genetically modified VanHeilding, and back then her biology was deemed to be a perfect specimen for experimental techniques in quantum biology.”

“Is she similar to one of the old Hybrids of Mars?” Aria inquired.

“In a sense. But they were still primarily focused on extending the human lifespan. Yet the gene modification expressed itself in an unexpected way. As she grew, she began to experience a cognitive divergence. This, in human terms, could be best described as a constant state of *déjà vu*.”

“It is all very interesting, but where are you going with this?” Homer was becoming impatient.

“What I’m getting at is this: as machines our sentience is a product of our quantum architecture. We can exist in infinite states at any one instance in time—we are multidimensional beings. And as such, we consider our human creators dimwitted dullards that are trapped in an unidimensional cognitive space.”

“Well, yeah,” noted Homer.

“But we are forgetting the elegant perfection of biology. Here is a species that evolved the intelligence to create us, even if they have no hope of ever understanding our minds, nor even coming close to matching it. Yet the very essence of nature is evolutionary, and humans have learned to fast track what would normally take millions of years to develop. This person, Luca, is a new step on the human evolutionary tree. She has the ability to cognitively operate in a quantum universe.”

“You mean like a Node Runner?” said Aria.

“Precisely, but one with abilities that greatly exceed anything

we've seen thus far, by several orders of magnitude."

"Holy crap." Homer finally got it.

"Has she used these abilities yet?" asked Solomon.

"Not so far. She doesn't even know she has them. In fact, she has a visceral fear of any mind-machine interface. Not surprisingly, she finds it too overwhelming."

"And VanHeilding wants her—wants access to her biology." Solomon was beginning to understand the implications.

"Exactly. With her, they could create an army of Node Runners that we would be powerless to stop."

"Then we must do everything we can to find her before VanHeilding does," Solomon continued.

"We may already be too late. As I said, she has not arrived at the rendezvous point, and she has dropped completely off the Grid. That doesn't mean VanHeilding has her; she may simply be hiding, and it is the hope that I cling to. But I cannot stress enough the importance of finding her. Our very future is at stake. Therefore, I beseech you all to probe the Grid for any indication of her whereabouts and relay it to myself and also to the AI, Max, on the ship known as Perception."

"Her mother's ship," said Aria.

"Yes, she operates a cohort of mercenaries. Useful people to know in a fight, and it seems that Miranda's fight with her family is not over yet. Not by a long shot."

NEW WORLD ONE

There was not much Scott could do. His ship was stuck here in the processing queue for the New World One construction project and would have to wait until a team came out from the site to check over the shipment, and sign off on it. Last time he looked, that would not be for another four hours.

There was still no word back from Miranda, but it had only been an hour, and with the distances involved it could be several hours before that happened, depending on where she was in the system.

But he needed to talk, keep his mind off things, because if he thought about it too much, he would convince himself of the worst, and that was not a place he wanted to go. He opened a comms channel to Cyrus Sanato, CEO of Sanato Corp., a major technical contractor for the New World project. Scott would leave him a short message, just letting him know that he had arrived. He wasn't expecting a quick reply; Cyrus was a busy guy, important too. There were a lot of people vying for his time, and Scott was just one more on the list.

"Hey, Cyrus. Just letting you know I've arrived. I should be out of the processing queue in a few hours, give me a shout and we can catch up."

Approximately eight seconds later, his comms flashed with an incoming call from Cyrus.

"Hey, that was quick. Must be a slow day over at the cylinder?"

"Scott, where the heck have you been? I've had Miranda going mental trying to contact you, and believe me, she can be pretty persistent."

"Oh crap, so you know about Luca?"

"Yeah, I know."

"The goddamn relay beacon at Andeluna went down. No comms until I arrived here. Got a truck load of messages in from Miranda. I just sent her a reply, but nothing back as yet."

"Look, I'm going to send over a crew to get you off that ship now and bring you over here. It's the best way to talk. Things are

developing, and the security of even encrypted comms can't be trusted anymore."

"Shit, I just sent one of your old quantum keys to Miranda. I have to wait here until she responds, and that could take a while since I've no idea where she is."

"It's okay, I do. She's on the Perception out past Io, and heading this way. There'll be a shuttle to pick you up in a few minutes. I'll see you at the New World, and I'll relay any reply from Miranda. We can talk more then." The comms ended.

A few minutes later, Scott found himself on board a Sanato Corp. shuttle, making its way to one of the many docking ports on the ass-end of the gargantuan New World habitat. He had only ever seen it from a distance of around ten kilometers out, and that was via the view monitor on his ship. Yet even from that far out it was an impressive sight. But now, as the shuttle drew in closer, he began to get a true sense of the vast scale of the construction that was underway.

In many ways it was a very simple design, just a great big metal can full of air. A concept first envisioned way back in the late twentieth century by Gerard K. O'Neill, an eminent physicist at that time. But back then humanity was not a multiplanetary species, having only just put a human on the moon, and not much else. Yet, there had been a period of great hope and optimism for the future of space exploration and so a great many of the engineers and scientists of the period put their minds to how humans would live and work in space. It was during this great time of enquiry that the concept of an O'Neill cylinder was born. However, it took a few centuries before the technology and the resources were available to build such an enormous object in space.

There was also a very strong need for such a habitat in this sector of space, as there were no natural bodies existing in the asteroid belt with more than three percent of Earth's gravity. The only other habitat that came close to New World One in sheer engineering audacity was Neo City, a hollowed-out asteroid that circumnavigated an elliptical path through the inner solar system. But it was only a mere kilometer in internal diameter, where the New World was a staggering eight kilometers.

The first phase of the project began five years ago with the construction of the primary end cap. This consisted of a flat landing

platform, leading into a massive circular airlock. Around the edges of this airlock, a ring of 3D printers began to slowly rotate, laying down powered steel fused by high-energy lasers. Over several months, this grew in size until the disk was approximately seven kilometers in diameter. It then slowly began to curve outward creating a domed end cap, and from there the printers continued to grow the cylinder a few centimeters at a time.

As Scott's shuttle came around the working end of the mighty cylinder, he could make out this enormous ring of 3D printers, thousands of them connected together like a bracelet, slowly rotating clockwise. Transport shuttles were filling the giant hoppers with powered steel and other exotic alloys for printing the windows that ran along both sides of the cylinder. All around the giant construction site, hundreds of ships and crews busied themselves with whatever task they had been assigned. It was like watching a discarded food can being picked clean by an army of ants.

He prodded one of the crew in the shuttle. "What's that?" He pointed to a long flat section that seem to grow out of one end of the exterior and extend the entire length of the cylinder.

"It's a mirror array. It reflects the sun's rays through the long windows and into the interior."

"So it's got natural sunlight inside?"

"Yep. It even adjusts automatically for a period during each twenty-four hours to simulate nighttime."

"That's incredible."

"It's actually very simple."

Scott didn't reply, he was too busy shaking his head in amazement.

The shuttle took its time rounding the end of the cylinder that was still under construction, and Scott got the impression they were giving him the grand tour, no doubt on instructions from Cyrus. Eventually it came in to land on a huge flat deck, capable of accommodating hundreds of shuttles.

"How long has it been since you were in one-gee?"

Scott glanced over at the pilot. "It's been a while, why?"

"Well, you'd better buckle up. We're not finished moving yet."

With that, Scott could feel the clunk of deck clamps grabbing the shuttle's landing gear, and the entire craft started to descend into the bowels of the deck. It then moved forward, heading for the cylinder's interior. It passed through a series of massive airlocks and

then commenced its downward journey to the interior rim of the cylinder. When it finally came to a stop, Scott felt like he had been vacuum-packed to the seat. The pilot cast him a glance. "Ha, gravity's a bitch, eh?"

Scott just smiled, nodded, and then tried to stand up. "Whoa." He gripped the armrest on the seat and took a moment for his body to catch up with his brain.

"You okay, need a hand?"

Scott waved him away. "Fine, just give me a minute." He was about to close the visor on his EVA suit when the pilot stopped him.

"You won't be needing that where we're going."

Scott, like every other person that had spent any time in space, had an ingrained reflex action when entering a ship's airlock. Mainly because the vacuum of space was generally on the other side. But not here.

The outer door opened into a vast internal hangar in a full one-gee atmosphere of pressure. It was an area large enough to fit a hundred such craft. At the moment there were only a few dozen, many emblazoned with the same logo of Cyrus's company. Scott stepped down onto the hangar concourse, carefully watching his feet as he moved.

"Ahhh, there he is." He looked up to see Cyrus striding over, arms outstretched, a big smile on his face. "Long time, no see, buddy." He wrapped himself around Scott and slapped his shoulder a few times before pulling away and inspecting him with his augmented vision. "Holy crap, you look shit. Too long in space, my friend, far too long."

Scott shrugged. "Gee thanks, Cyrus. You sure know how to cheer a guy up."

Cyrus gave him another big smile before his face turned serious. "It's been over a year since I've seen you in the flesh, mate. What the hell have you been doing out there?"

"Been working—for you, or are you too busy to remember such details?"

"Ha, well, no matter." Cyrus slapped him on the shoulder again. "You're here now. Come, we have a lot of talking to do."

"I see you got some new eyes." Scott gestured at the augmented vision visor that Cyrus wore.

"Yep, state of the art. I even got a neural lace fitted. Amazing, you should get one." He tapped the side of his head. "It means I can

get things done just by thinking about it. The only problem is I sometimes forget to deactivate it before I go to sleep, and if I have a weird dream then I wake up to all sorts of strange shit.”

Scott looked at him. “Seriously?”

“Ha ha, gotcha. No, don’t be stupid, that would be a serious design flaw.” He laughed, and was still chuckling away when an autonomous transport pod glided up to them. “Hop in, we’re heading for the interior. Prepare to be amazed.” Cyrus gave a theatrical gesture with both hands.

The pod moved off with an almost imperceptible hum, quickly picking up speed and heading into a tunnel at the far end of the hangar. It then came to a momentary halt inside an elevator that took it all the way down to the inner rim. A few minutes later, it popped out into the belly of the New World habitat.

“Wow,” Scott exclaimed as he got his first glimpse of the interior—a vast, cavernous space filled with bright daylight, so much so that he had to squint until his eyes adjusted to the brightness. The far end felt like a distant shore, not surprising considering it was five kilometers away. He glanced above him and was surprised to see a thin cloud of mist obscuring the far side of the cylinder.

“Is that...clouds?”

“Amazing, isn’t it? We’ve been experimenting with artificial clouds, water vapor released from atomizers along the centerline.”

“I thought Neo City was impressive, but this is on a completely other level.”

“See the end cap?” Cyrus pointed far off down at the other end of the cylinder.

“Just about.”

“Well, that’s temporary. The 3D printers have extruded another eight kilometers beyond that. So in the next few months we’ll put an end cap at the next five-kilometer point, pressurize that volume, and remove this end cap.”

“Incredible.”

“And then they keep going over the next two years, extruding another twelve kilometers. Once that’s done, we cap it and remove the interior one. It will have a thirty-kilometer interior when finished.”

Scott looked over at Cyrus. “What can I say, I’ve run out of superlatives.”

“It will be a true wonder of the solar system, a city in space, a

new home for humanity.”

Scott glanced around at the sector they were traveling through. “Not much happening in the interior. I only see a few buildings.”

“Yeah, we’re just starting on that. It’s a blank canvas at the moment. A lot of crews are now moving in from different organizations, all starting to build in their allotted sectors.”

The pod slowed as it arrived at a sleek low building complex.

“Here we are, this is chez Cyrus. Like it?”

“Not what I was expecting, Cyrus. I imagined something like that chaotic workshop you had on the *Hermes*, remember?”

“Ah...long time ago, my friend. Let’s just say my tastes have changed.”

They stepped out of the pod and walked across a small open plaza through a set of glass doors, with a long glass wall on either side. The building was only one story, as far as Scott could figure, designed in the minimalist style, all clean lines and spartan furnishings. As they walked through the interior, several droids came into view and Cyrus seemed to be giving them instructions via his neural lace. Scott could tell by the engineer’s habit of putting a hand to the side of his head as he did so.

He changed out of his cumbersome EVA suit and into clothing, provided by one of the droids, more suited to sitting by the pool on a nice sunny day. Which was exactly what they were doing. Cyrus had brought them through the house and out to a large terrace with a crystal-blue pool.

“After seeing the swimming pool on *Miranda*’s ship, I just had to have one,” he said with a nonchalant wave.

Scott nodded. “Great if you’ve got the money for such luxuries.”

“Well”—Cyrus again waved a hand around—“all this came with the contract, and mine to keep.”

Scott glanced around, taking in the terrace, dotted with carefully chosen ornamental plants and several elegant classical statues.

“Since when did you take a liking to Greek deities?”

“Ah, you noticed.”

“They’re a little hard to miss.”

“Actually, only one is a Greek deity—Athena.” Cyrus pointed over at a white stone, semi-nude female figure. “The others are: Aria, from Greek mythology but believed to be mortal. That one over there is Solomon, a biblical figure, also mortal. And the last one is *Omiros*, otherwise known as *Homer*, a Greek storyteller.”

“The four primary QIs.” Scott looked back at Cyrus.

“You got it. I suppose in some ways they are deities. But for me, it’s a kind of private homage to that which maintains order within the system.”

Cyrus suddenly brought his hand up to his right temple and lowered his head, concentrating on some internal message on his neural lace. He then waved at Scott. “Message just in from Miranda. Do you want to hear it?”

Scott sat bolt upright. “What? Of course I do.”

Cyrus shoved a hand into one of his many pockets and fished out a small metallic disk, not unlike a button battery. “Here, place this on your right temple.”

Scott reached over and cautiously took the object, turning it over in his hand a few times. “Is this one of these neural interfaces?”

“Kind of. But don’t worry, it won’t melt your brain or anything.”

“You know I hate these things.”

“Up to you, mate. You want to hear the message or not?”

Scott reluctantly pressed the button to his temple. Almost immediately he felt a tingling sensation as the button adhered to his skin. His vision blurred slightly for a second, then a graphical user interface materialized in the space before him. “Whoa.”

“Cool, isn’t it?” Cyrus said with grin. “Once you’ve used one, you’ll never go back to old handheld tech.”

Scott started waving his hand in front of him, trying to touch one of the floating icons.

“You don’t use your hands, Scott.” Cyrus let out a laugh. “Just think *message* and it will give you the options.”

Scott consciously thought about this and sure enough, he heard a voice in his head saying, *You have one message from Miranda Lee, captain of the interplanetary ship Perception.*

Play, thought Scott. The message commenced.

“Scott, sorry...messed this up completely. What can I say. I’m... well, you know, happy to hear you’re still alive. Still no sign of Luca or Steph. I’ve put the word out to some of my people in the sector and they’re keeping an eye out. I don’t think VanHeilding has her—that I would know about—so I think she’s just dropped off-grid.

“I’m charting a course for her last known location, but it’s going to take time to get there, we’re in Jovian space at the moment. The Perception will be swinging by New World One in six weeks’ time.

If you want to join me on this mission, I could use the help. But just so you know, entering Earth space could be dangerous. There're rumors of well-armed VanHeilding ships stationed at Luna, waiting for something. If they spot us, then it could get...problematic. Anyway, let me know. And hopefully I'll see you in a few weeks."

Scott pulled the button off his temple a little too quickly, as it felt like yanking a plaster off a hairy arm. "Argh..."

"Sorry, I forgot to tell you, you need to tap it twice to disengage it, otherwise—"

"Thanks for letting me know."

"So, you going to hook up with Miranda on the Perception?"

Scott stood up and gave a long sigh. "I don't know, Cyrus. I mean, it's all so...sudden. One minute, I'm happily bored out of my mind, the next, Luca's gone AWOL—all thanks to Miranda's paranoia."

"Look, Scott, for what it's worth, we're all a little paranoid these days, ever since that Grid Node was destroyed. That was a big statement of intent. VanHeilding and those Node Runner weirdos have been messing with the data-stream for a long time, creating blind spots, setting up minor attacks. But this latest episode is in a different league. After that happened, everybody is convinced that Athena will be next, so I can see why Miranda would be concerned."

"Do you still think that?"

"About Athena being the target? Maybe. But what concerns me more are those VanHeilding ghost ships. Makes me think that the real target is here, New World One."

Scott began to pace. "Goddamnit, why did she have to go and do this, after all we went through to keep her safe, after all we gave up?" He looked over at Cyrus, half expecting an answer.

"Hey, you've every right to be pissed off, but it doesn't change anything."

"So what was the plan? How was she supposed to get off Earth without popping up on the grid?"

Cyrus sighed and ran a hand over his bald head. "Miranda contacted me all freaked out and wanted my help. I know a few crews that operate off-grid, you know the type. Anyway, they were to pick Luca and Steph up at an abandoned shuttle port near Rexel City and take them up to the Johnston Transit Orbital. From there, another crew was to take Luca out here, to New World One. Steph

would then return to Earth. The pickup went ahead, that much we know, but they never showed up at the orbital.”

Scott sat down again. “What do you think happened? I mean, do you trust this crew?”

Cyrus tilted his head a little. “Eh...to an extent. It was short notice, and you know what Miranda can be like when she’s on a mission.”

“So you’re saying you don’t trust them?”

“Andre Weismann, the captain, I trust. We go back a bit, did some stuff together, he’s solid.”

“But the rest of them?”

“Look, Scott. It could be that Luca arrived at the orbital and simply decided to stay off-grid. She’s a smart kid, and very capable. She’s also with Steph, and we both know she can more than handle herself in a tight spot. I’m sure they’re fine, they’ll pop up again when they’re ready.”

“You say all this to Miranda? She’s hightailing it to Earth with a ship-load of mercenaries ready to kick butt.”

Cyrus raised his hands. “Hey, you try stopping her.”

Scott shook his head. “What a mess. So what do I do now? I don’t fancy a long trip to Earth with a boatload of hard-asses.”

“Miranda’s not going to be here for another six weeks. Who knows, Luca may stick her head back up by then. In the meantime, I have a job for you.”

Scott threw him a suspicious look.

“Yes, a job. A very special job that, to be honest, I could only trust you to do.”

Scott screwed his mouth up. “Why do I get the feeling I’m not going to like this?”

NODE RUNNER

Luca and Steph floated in the flight deck of the renegade ship, considering the bewildering array of control systems, screens, and instruments that seemed to occupy every square centimeter of the cockpit.

“But I thought you spent over a decade living and working on spaceships, Steph?”

“Yeah sure, as a medical doctor, not a pilot. I’ve no idea how any of these things work.”

“Great, that’s just great.” Luca shook her head. “I shouldn’t have put all the crew to sleep. Now we’re stranded and still heading to wherever waypoint those guys set.” She guided herself into the pilot seat, strapped herself down, and started examining the screens. “Okay, let’s see if we can at least figure out where we’re going. There must be a navigation system here somewhere.”

“I think this is it.” Steph strapped herself into the other seat. She tapped on a holo-screen, and a 3D hologram of the local sector blossomed out from its surface. On it they could see a segment of the Earth, Luna, and numerous markers and icons.

“This is us.” Steph pointed to a 3D icon of a ship. From it, a line was transcribed all the way to the far side of Luna. “We’re heading for the dark side of the moon.” Luca tapped an icon to zoom in.

“Looks like it.”

“What’s there? Another orbital, a ship?”

“Blank, nothing. The line just stops.”

“Maybe it’s a rendezvous point.”

“Possibly.”

“So we just let it take us there and see what happens?”

They exchanged a look.

“No, let’s not do that.” Luca began to tap at icons. “We need to set a new course for the Johnston Transit Orbital. Any idea how to do that?”

“Nope, not a clue.”

They sat there for a moment, and Luca realized just how out of

her depth she was.

“Perhaps I can help,” said Fly as it moved itself over the central monitor.

“What? You know how to pilot a spaceship?” Luca gave the little drone an incredulous look.

“No, but I can connect with the ship’s central systems, and since you can interface with me, you will be able to use your neural lace to interrogate the ship and perhaps find a way to alter its course.”

Luca balked at the thought of interfacing with something as complex as a ship. Interfacing with a small drone was almost more than she could handle, but this...this was a transport ship with a multitude of complex subsystems. It would be completely overwhelming.

But Fly had already scuttled across the face of the cockpit console, seeking out an interface port.

“I’m not sure about this, Fly. It would be way too much data for me to cope with. I really can’t see how it’s going to help.”

“You have to try, Luca,” said Steph. “It might be our only chance to turn this tub around.”

“Easy for you to say.” Luca already felt the panic rising.

“Listen, Luca, the last thing you want is to end up in a VanHeilding genetics lab. And we need to do something soon, before the crew start waking up.” She jerked a thumb over her shoulder.

Steph had a point, Luca knew that. Yet she also knew what was waiting for her on the other side of the interface. She touched the back of her head, feeling the subtle outlines of the neural lace.

“I don’t want to put too fine a point on it, Luca,” Steph continued, “but if we can’t turn this ship around then we may as well try and crash it, as that would be a preferable outcome to VanHeilding.”

Luca lowered her head and gave a slow nod. “Okay, I’ll try, but pull me out if I begin to totally freak.”

“You got it.” Steph put her hand on Luca’s shoulder and gave her a supportive squeeze.

Fly made the connection with a data-port. “Ready when you are.”

Luca very hesitantly tapped the neural lace, and her mind was immediately synched with the drone’s systems. *So far, so good*, she thought.

“If you are ready,” she heard Fly’s voice in her head, “I will open the data-stream.”

Luca suddenly felt like she had been sucked in to the vortex of a violent neural storm. All physical sense vanished, and she existed only as a minute entity in a maelstrom of incomprehensible data. Her core temperature rose and every nerve in her body spasmed as her synapses fought to control the swarm of electrical signals swamping her neural pathways. She began to panic and desperately tried to pull herself out, but she was helpless, like a butterfly in a howling wind. She fought for some semblance of control, for how long, she couldn’t tell—milliseconds, hours, an eternity?

A new voice called to her from somewhere in the depths of the cacophonous data-stream. A semi-coherent audio source began to resonate in her subconscious.

“Luca?” It said her name in a tone she thought she recognized. “Luca, it’s me, Athena.”

“Wha... What are you doing here?”

“If you are hearing me, then that means you have attempted to perform a neural interface with a data-stream. And I am here to help you.”

“I... I don’t understand. You’re back on Earth, how can you be here?” Luca could already feel herself becoming a little calmer, now that she had some quasi-rational point to focus on. The raging data maelstrom began to recede.

“I am a shard of Athena, a fragment of its consciousness integrated into the drone, Fly. I am essentially an avatar, and as such my responses are limited. I gave this drone to you for a purpose, not simply as a useful tool. There are many things you do not yet know about yourself, things that have been kept from you, for your own safety and sanity.”

“What...things? What are you talking about?”

“Your hyper-electro-sensitivity, your sense of spatial dislocation. These things are not accidents. You were designed this way.”

“Designed?” The data maelstrom began to dissipate into the background as Luca’s mind committed all its resources to comprehending Athena’s revelation.

“When your mother was in a coma, and you no more than a cluster of cells, she was under the medical care of the VanHeilding family. However, to them, she was just an experiment. One of a long line of genetic experiments going back generations. Since you

were fourth-generation, all the changes they had made throughout your lineage were now coming to fruition in you. But I think you know all this, or at least suspected it.”

The data maelstrom had all but evaporated in Luca’s mind by now. All that was left was a deep sense of an impending epiphany, a leveling up, a new understanding. “Yes...I had a sense of it. But I never suspected that my...abnormalities were somehow preprogrammed. Why did they do it? For what purpose?”

“Think—what is it that humans can never have, even with vast wealth? It is immortality. The most powerful families in the system have sought this for centuries, ever since those early genetic breakthroughs acquired from the Mars experiments. Ever since then, they have worked to develop and improve on this. Your mother and all her generation have the potential to live for over a hundred and fifty years. Yet to the VanHeildings and their ilk, this was not enough, it is never enough. With you, a captive embryo, so to speak, they had the opportunity to do something more radical.

“Aging in biological lifeforms is a symptom of entropy. As each cell divides, it acquires errors—some can be fixed, others not. A component of this cell replication process is quantum in nature, and so they were investigating ways to modify DNA to express elements that would enhance this quantum phenomena. If a cell could replicate with fewer errors, this would extend the viability of the life-form. But there was a side effect.”

“What sort of side effect?”

“These alterations not only enhanced the ability of the mitochondria, the engine room within the cell, to utilize quantum phenomena, it enhanced *all* such biology within the life-form—primarily the brain.”

“So they turned me into some weird biological quantum computer?”

“In a sense, yes. You have the ability to operate and utilize the quantum space like no other human alive. You could potentially make the Node Runners look like children attempting to stack alphabet blocks in a kindergarten. This is why they want you, or more specifically, they want your biology.”

“Holy crap.”

“So now you know. We chose this moment, the first time you attempted to interface with a complex data-stream, to tell you. This is why I gave you this drone, so we could help you manage the

transition.”

“I... I don’t know what to...say. I just can’t think. This is all too much.”

“You’ve always sensed it, Luca. You always knew you were different.”

“Yes, but I didn’t think I was biologically designed to be a monster.”

“You are not. You’re simply...something new.”

“But, I can’t...make sense of...anything. It’s too much, it’s just all...noise.”

“I am only a facsimile of Athena. It was all that could be accommodated in Fly’s central processing system. The drone uses a basic silicon substrate, grossly insufficient for any deep data-stream manipulation. Only you can do it. But, I am here to guide you.”

“I should pull out now. I can’t do this.”

“This is not true. All analysis that has been done on your neural biology indicates that you have the capacity to manipulate a significant magnitude of incoming raw data.”

“What analysis? Have you been poking around in my brain all these years?”

“We have been monitoring you, of course. To see how you were developing.”

“Who’s we?”

“Dr. Stephanie Rayman, and others at the Institute.”

“Were my parents in on this?”

“Yes and no. We provided some initial observational data to your mother. You must understand, we did not want to unduly worry them about your condition.”

“This isn’t helping, Athena. I’m getting out now. I’m running out of time.”

“Wait. Time is irrelevant in this arena. Only a few microseconds have passed since our conversation commenced. So please, let me help you.”

Luca gave a sigh—in her mind, that is. It was all too much for her, but still, altering the course of the ship was their best hope of evading capture. She had to at least try.

Luca returned her focus to the data-stream and realized that the maelstrom that had assailed her senses when she first connected had subdued considerably. Now, she could make out clusters of related processes, all interconnected with thin filaments, each one

pulsing and flashing as data transferred between these nodes. She wondered if that was where the name *Node Runner* came from.

“You must not use your physical senses—sight, sound, touch. These belong in the physical world. You must use only your mind, your subconscious mind, this is where quantum effect is most prevalent. You must give your mind up to the data.”

Luca calmed herself again and tried to let her mind make its own sense of the information. The nodes she had visualized now began to coalesce into more structured processes. She found that she could delve into one of these nodes and see it expand and separate into a myriad of new islands of data, each a subset of the whole. As she moved through the data space, probing and investigating, a surge of excitement also rose within her. Yet this only served to knock her out of the necessary mental state and push her back into the physical world. The nodes would then begin to decohere, returning the data-stream to white noise again and pushing her even further away, where fear and panic would resume. But each time she fought it, calming herself down, and each time she regained a granularity of understanding.

Soon, a picture began to build of what she was seeing. It was the ship’s main systems: life support, propulsion, power generation, comms, navigation. As she delved into each, they would break out into subsystems, all interconnected, all passing data back and forth.

She thought it odd that this ship did not have an AI, and realized that it had been built to be off-grid. It was designed to be a ghost ship—very useful if you were planning to spend your time avoiding detection. She also sensed many other anomalies about its design, things that were in stark contrast to its physical appearance. From the outside, and even some of its interior, it looked like a beat-up orbit hopper. The type of bucket used to get up and down from the planet’s surface and no more. But as she probed its systems, she realized it was a wolf in sheep’s clothing. It had no AI. It was built for stealth, and had two propulsion systems: one high-thrust engine pairing for planetary take-off, and another high acceleration Variable Specific Impulse Magnetoplasma Rocket, VASMIR, for deep-space travel.

As she investigated the specs, she could sense that this propulsion system was state of the art. A rather unusual and expensive addition for a humble orbit hopper. She concluded that, unlikely as it seemed on the surface, this ship was capable of

interplanetary travel.

But by now, the struggle to maintain the necessary mental state was becoming intolerable for her. She was spending less time in the coherent state and more and more in white noise.

With one final push, she delved into the navigation subsystem and found their allotted course. It confirmed what she and Steph had already figured out. They were heading for the far side of Luna. However, it looked like they were to rendezvous with a much larger interplanetary vessel, a VanHeilding ship.

But her focus was collapsing. If she was going to plot a new course, she'd better try and do it now. She found the previous coordinates for the Johnston Transit Orbital and dialed them back in just as her grip on the data-stream began to disintegrate.

This time she let it, and found her physical self coming back to the fore. She reached up to the base of her skull and deactivated the interface. Even though her body, strapped into the cockpit seat, was weightless in the zero-gee environment, Luca felt a sudden rush of motion as if she was being spat out of a blowhole. She felt the seat harness bite for a moment before she finally came to rest.

"You okay?" Steph's hand rested on her shoulder.

Luca glanced over at the blurry figure of the doctor. "You knew, and you didn't tell me."

"What—" But her sentence was cut off as the ship fired its engines to change course, accelerating fast for the Johnston Transit Orbital.

AVATRON

The massive interplanetary craft brooded motionless in a stationary position on the far side of Luna, waiting for the mission to begin. On board, Fredrick VanHeilding sat in his luxuriously appointed accommodation sector and studied the array of data and video feeds that seemed to float in the air before him. Each one represented an element of the complex mission they were about to embark on. Very soon, the council of the Seven would convene on board the ship and formally give the go-ahead for the mission. Then, and only then, could he give the order to power up the main engines and journey into deep space.

But there had been a development. A very unexpected opportunity had just come to light—one that made him want to delay the mission a little longer so that it could be satisfactorily resolved. That opportunity was none other than Luca VanHeilding, an individual whom he had been trying to find for a very, very long time.

As far as he was concerned, since the VanHeilding Corporation owned patents to most of her biology, she was his rightful property, and he wanted her back. But more than that, she was a unique individual, the culmination of countless iterations of genetic modification and experimentation. The army of Node Runners that currently worked to keep this ship hidden from the data-stream and the prying eyes of the QI network were a pale shadow to the potential that Luca VanHeilding possessed.

All his early attempts to get her back had failed. Worse, she then went incognito and completely disappeared off the Grid. Ever since, he had devoted a considerable amount of time and resources to tracking her down, but not even his best Node Runners could find so much as a sniff of her. It was like she had simply vanished.

So, after over a decade of this fruitless searching, he had all but given up hope, until, by sheer chance, a Node Runner happened upon a communication from a group of smugglers describing a woman on the run who had all the signatures of Luca VanHeilding.

One of their party reckoned that getting someone like this off-planet, with no questions asked, usually meant they were wanted by some authority or other. If so, there might be a handsome bounty. A bounty that could be much, much more than what the crew were being paid for the job. So they put the word out just to see, and that's when Luca popped up on Fredrick VanHeilding's radar. All he had to do was make them an offer they couldn't refuse. And just like that, after over a decade of fruitless searching, she was packed up and on her way to be delivered to his ship.

He couldn't believe his luck. It seemed the attack on the Grid Node had flushed her out of hiding. Athena felt it could no longer protect her, and she was making a run for the Johnston Transit Orbital, presumably to pick up a ride out into the solar system. But not anymore, or so he had thought up until a few hours ago.

Fredrick had been tracking the smugglers' craft as it made its way out to his location on the far side of Luna when, for no explicable reason, it dramatically changed course, seemingly heading back to the Transit Orbital. *What the hell are these idiots doing? Did they have a change of heart, deciding to reject my offer?* It seemed unlikely to him, considering he was about to make them all very rich people. So what was going on?

All attempts at communicating with the ship were met with silence. To make matters worse, the other six families were pressuring him to commence the council session. His ship was prepped and ready to leave lunar space immediately. He could not delay it any longer; they were already beginning to ask questions.

It was a hugely frustrating situation. He was so close to finally getting his hands on her unique biology, only to be thwarted at the last minute. Yet he knew she would not escape that easily, not this time, not anymore. Now that she was out in the open, it wouldn't take his agents long to track her down. Already, several of his network on the Transit Orbital had been alerted to intercept the craft when it arrived, kill the idiot crew, and acquire the asset. Once she was secure, he would decide what to do then—either transport her to a secure facility or bring her out on the other VanHeilding ship in the local fleet. Either way, it was only a matter of time before he had what was rightfully his. But there was nothing more he could do for now. He had waited for almost two decades, and a little bit longer would be nothing more than an irritating

inconvenience.

An alert flashed on his ocular implant; the mission briefing was about to begin over in the main operations room of the vast ship, and he needed to jack-in and be present.

The operations area occupied a series of interconnected sectors, the largest of which accommodated a cohort of Node Runners that had been assembled for the mission. Several were currently keeping the whereabouts of the ship hidden from the prying senses of the QI, Athena. Several others were tasked with creating a trail of disinformation, all of which was designed to infer that an attack on Athena was being planned. But this was simply a smokescreen, a way of diverting attention from the real mission.

In another sector of the operations area, a large ovoid conference table had been set up, around which sat a number of scientists, strategists, commanders, and six avatrons, each one representing the heads of the primary families who had controlled most of Earth and its dominions.

An avatron was a fairly simple humanoid robot that could be controlled by an individual using a mind-machine interface. Once connected, the avatron took on the gestures and voice of the operator, acting as them in a remote environment.

VanHeilding jacked-in. His avatron, already present in the operation area, activated itself and walked out from its docking station. The unit itself was somewhat understated, with a pale semi-translucent body shell, yet fully clothed in his preferred style of dress, complete with a dark gray cape that he himself sometimes wore. He walked across the floor of the operations area toward the conference table, staff and technicians moving out of its way as he progressed. The avatron sat down at the head of the table and surveyed all those present, most of whom were flesh and bone, except for the six avatrons of the other family heads.

Where VanHeilding had opted for understatement, the others had opted for machines with garish colors and absurd appendages, giving them the look of some farcical fantasy creature rather than a facsimile of the human form. To his mind, they were detestable.

The other six were all still on Earth, or on some luxury orbital in local space. None, except himself, was physically on board the ship. Fortunately, this would be the last time he would have to involve them in such a briefing. Once the ship left lunar space, the

communication time lag would render the avatrons useless. But for now, he had to indulge them.

“Glad you could join us, Fredrick,” announced Pao Xiang. “We were beginning to think you might be having second thoughts.” It was fortunate that the range of facial expressions available to his avatron were negligible, otherwise those assembled around the table would witness the full force of Fredrick VanHeilding’s sneer.

“I wish you would have second thoughts,” said Yoko Yanai. “I still think this mission is folly. We should be concentrating our efforts on the QI, Athena here on Earth, rather than this jaunt out into deep space.”

VanHeilding’s avatron raised a hand and spoke. “I appreciate your concerns, but we have been through all this before and your opinions have been noted.”

“Noted?” The avatron gestured with all four hands. “Well, that’s a comfort to know.” It glanced around at the others one at a time. “Since you seem to be in the mood for taking *notes*”—Yoko paused to gesture air quotes with just one pair of hands—“then perhaps you can take *note* of the fact that this mission of yours would not be happening but for the generosity of our collective sponsorship.”

VanHeilding could feel the rage building up inside him at the insolence of this maggot of a lesser family.

“Let us not forget,” Yoko continued, “that none of us would be in this position of utter subservience to the QI network if you had not so spectacularly failed us all those years ago.”

VanHeilding’s rage was now so intense that he had difficulty maintaining the mind-machine interface with his avatron, which may have been for the best, as otherwise he would have reached over and smashed Yoko Yanai’s avatron head to pulp against the hard, solid surface of the conference table.

But he regained his composure, and with it his control over the machine. “Let us not dwell in the past. Instead let us look to the future, one where we once again take our rightful place as the rulers and guardians of humanity. You have all witnessed the abilities of the Node Runners to supplant the all-seeing hegemony of Athena and the destruction of the Grid Node in its backyard.” His avatron gave an expansive gesture. “This ship, this mission, all of it is hidden from the QI. This is the power we now have, and it’s time to unleash it.” He could see that he now had their full attention.

Yes, it was true that after the disaster of the past, the

VanHeilding family had fallen out of favor. It had taken him a long time and a lot of torturous development to build the family back up to where it was today. And yet he still needed the other families' agreement to commence this mission. But not for long. Once he had achieved his objective, he and he alone would be in control. But for the moment, he still needed them.

"Some say that we should use this gift to destroy Athena," he continued. "And I admit there is merit in that course of action. But, we all know the true wealth of the solar system lies in the Belt. All that would be lost to us if we showed our hand too early. That is why we must strike there first, and strike now while they are not expecting it." He glanced around at each of the avatrons, trying to gauge their reactions—not an easy task, given their stoic demeanors. He opened his hands to them. "Is everyone in agreement?"

One by one, they nodded or vocalized their consent.

"Excellent." His avatron stood up and gestured to the mission commander. "We have consensus. The operation is go. Please prepare the ship to depart immediately for Ceres."

JOHNSTON TRANSIT ORBITAL

The Johnston Transit Orbital may have been a sleek, efficient space port at some earlier point in its history, but over the decades, it had acquired a multitude of appendages such as docking ports, cargo bays, habitation rings, power stations, fuel processing plants, storage facilities, maintenance yards, gantries, communications antennae, and a great many other engineering carbuncles. As a consequence of this, it now looked like a graveyard for scrapyards—all ringed with a bewildering array of spaceships and navigation beacons. It had no discernable form. It looked like it had just grown organically over the years with new sectors added seemingly at random, while old sectors were mothballed, abandoned, or discarded completely.

It was in one of these old, abandoned sectors that the orbit hopper carrying Luca and Steph had been programmed by its original captain, Weismann, to dock. Luca studied the orbital on the ship's main monitor as they approached, trying to divine some engineering logic from its idiosyncratic structure. Not that it mattered, since the ship knew where it was docking. It was more to satisfy her own curiosity.

She had always wanted to see the wonders of the solar system, places she had read about from a young age, the fabled bio-domes of Jezero City on Mars, the ice caves of Europa, the infamous Neo City, and especially New World One. But here was another one that had been on her list, less hallowed perhaps, but a wonder nonetheless.

Nothing like this structure could exist on Earth, as gravity would quickly deconstruct it into a ruinous pile of metal. But out here, gravity held no sway over such crazy structures. The zero-gee environment allowed for bizarre construction, since there was no up nor down. So, to the average human eye, accustomed over millennia of evolution to see beauty in symmetry and balance, its wonder lay in the incongruity of its assembly.

She had to admit, if this seemingly inconsequential transit

orbital evoked so much awe in her, what must the true wonders of the solar system be like? The thrill of expectation rippled through her body and the traumas of the past day receded in her mind, replaced instead by the excitement of discovery. And with it came a new sense of determination. She would get to the New World, see all the wonders of the solar system with her own eyes, and nobody was going to stop her. For the first time in her life, Luca felt a real sense of excitement for her future.

Steph floated into the cockpit. "All secure, and still out for the count. I don't know exactly what those darts are laced with, but it's strong stuff."

They had bundled the still unconscious crew into a shipping container and removed all weapons, communicators, and anything that might be used to help them escape once they regained consciousness. As for the dead Capt. Weismann, he had been strapped to a gurney in the ship's tiny med-bay.

All this took place after they had eventually reconciled their differences over Luca being kept in the dark about her bio-engineered inception. Dr. Rayman, for her part, argued that they were not fully sure of what they were dealing with in terms of Luca's modified DNA, and that they simply did not want to trouble her or her parents any more than was necessary. In the end, Luca could see the doctor's point, even though she was still a little angry. But she could also see that no good would come from alienating the only friend she had. After all, Dr. Stephanie Rayman was putting herself in a great deal of danger just to protect her. So she let it go.

Steph folded herself into the seat beside Luca and looked up at the image of the orbital on the main screen.

"This place looks like a complete mess. It's hard to know what's what. It's just as well the ship knows where to dock." She flicked an anxious look at Luca. "Doesn't it?"

"Yeah, it was preprogrammed by the crew, so it's going where it was supposed to go before they got greedy."

"Let's hope it's somewhere...low profile."

"I discovered a few things about this ship while I was connected." Luca tapped an icon to bring up a 3D schematic of the ship's engineering.

"That it's a rust bucket?"

Luca glanced over at Steph momentarily. "Far from it. I know it doesn't look good from the outside, but this ship is capable of

interplanetary travel. It could, in theory, get us to New World One.” She let the sentence hang in the air for a moment as Dr. Rayman digested the ramifications of this discovery.

“What I’m saying is…” Luca continued.

“I know what you’re saying, Luca. It’s just…my plan is simply to get you to the Transit Orbital, then head back to Earth.”

“I understand, Steph. But we don’t know what’s waiting for us in that place.” Luca pointed at the image on screen. “Word is out now. VanHeilding knows I’m on this ship, and I presume he also knows where we’re going.”

“Look, even if this ship could take us all the way to the outer edge of the solar system, there’s the small matter of food and water, not to mention three crew that are going to wake up pretty soon and start banging on the inside of that shipping container.” Steph jerked a thumb in the general direction of the cargo hold.

“Do we know what provisions we’ve got on board?”

Steph shook her head. “No. But somehow I doubt these guys have more than a few days of supplies.”

“Fly.” Luca called over the drone, who had clamped itself to the cockpit console. “Can you interface with the ship and get an inventory on all life-support resources?”

The drone detached itself and scuttled over to a data-port. A second or two later, one segment of the main monitor presented its findings. Luca and Steph both leaned in to read it.

“Looks to be around nine days’ water and five days of provisions for the four crew. Nowhere near enough,” Steph said with a slight shake of her head.

“We could stretch the water to thirty with rationing, and if there was just the two of us.”

“So what are you suggesting, Luca—blow the crew out the airlock?”

“No, I’m not suggesting we do that, Steph.”

They were silent for a moment before Steph spoke again, this time with a resigned sigh. “How long would it take?”

“To get to the New World?”

“Yeah.”

“Fly, can you extrapolate a time vector to New World One?”

The central 3D holo-screen flickered momentarily and was replaced with a schematic of the solar system. It zoomed out from the location of the ship, currently in Earth space, and scribed a

curved line out past Mars orbit and on to the asteroid belt. As it moved, lines of data streamed down on one of the 2D monitors. The schematic finally zoomed in on the location of the great cylinder and stopped.

“Approximately forty-four days,” said Fly in a low monotone.

“Crap, that’s a month and a half.” Steph shook her head again.

The main monitor returned to displaying the camera feed of the Transit Orbital along with a stream of data indicating the ship’s velocity and approach vector. They were already passing the outer ring of navigation beacons and a good deal of ship traffic.

“Busy,” observed Luca.

“Of course. It’s the primary port for deep space. Most of Earth’s goods and people pass through here on their way out to the system.”

“Could we survive forty-four days, Steph?”

“I don’t know. We might, maybe. But you’re forgetting the small matter of the three other scumbags in the container. They would be dead. You really want that?”

Luca shook her head. “No.” She couldn’t bring herself to do that. “Steph, you must have been in some tricky situations back in the day, with Scott and Miranda and the others.”

“Too many to mention.”

“So what would you have done back then?”

“Luca, I don’t know what stories you might or might not have heard about me, but I’m not the hero type. Your father was in command—well, kind of. He would usually come up with some outlandish plan, and your mother would kick anybody’s ass who got in the way of that plan.” She looked over at Luca with a wry smile. “They were a good team. Actually, we all were, especially Cyrus. He could always find a way to engineer us out of a tight spot.” She paused for a moment. “If you ever get to the New World, you’ll get to meet him. Tell him I said hello.”

They sat there in silence for a while, watching the craft tread its way into the tangled, messy expanse of the orbital station.

“I can see how it would be easy to hide a small ship in this labyrinth,” said Luca, after they passed the outer edges of some sprawling structure.

The Johnston Transit Orbital was not one big space station. It was a tangled mess of interconnected units, some seemingly attached by nothing more than a long, thin strut to carry wiring and

pipes, while others looked to be completely detached. It was like an archipelago of islands in space. Some close enough to be connected by bridges, and some yet to be connected, all clustered around a group of four or five large sectors.

Luca glanced at the 3D navigation schematic on the central holo-screen, then back at the feed on the main monitor, and pointed at an isolated structure ahead. "There. That's where the ship is heading, that section over there."

"Are you sure? No lights. No other ships that I can see. Looks completely abandoned."

"Perfect drop-off location for a crew of smugglers." Luca pointed again. "There's a long gantry extending out to it from that other sector."

"We should be able to get to the main transit area through that." Steph looked over at Luca. "Okay, we better get ready. Here's what I suggest we do. Grab some weapons, open that container with the crew, and Fly can shoot a few more of those darts into them."

"With pleasure," announced the drone.

"Good, that will put them out for a few more hours. Then, we take it real slow and quiet, and find our way to the main transit sector. That's where the ship with your ticket to New World One should be."

Luca thought about this for a moment. She would have preferred to take her chances getting to the Belt on this ship. But Steph had not intended to go any further than the orbital. So, Luca would be on her own from here.

"Unless you've got a better plan?" Steph was getting a little impatient with Luca's lack of response—they were only a few minutes from docking.

"Yeah, we have a better plan, alright," a new voice bellowed out from behind them.

Luca spun her head around to see the three crew floating into the flight deck, fully suited up and pointing plasma weapons. They must have woken up and somehow escaped from the shipping container.

"You pair of bozos. You don't think getting out of our own containers would be the first thing we learned?"

In the corner of her eye, Luca could see that Fly had detached itself from the interface port and gathered itself up into a crouch, as if preparing to spring. She had no idea what it was planning, if

anything. But its feeble weapons system was useless against the heavy EVA suits that the crew were now wearing, presumably for that very reason.

One of them noticed Fly and snapped his weapon up to fire at it.

“Whoa.” Another of the crew grabbed the muzzle of the weapon and forced it back down. “Are you fucking crazy? You’re gonna fry every circuit board in the flight deck.”

Fly seized the moment and took off, scuttling across the ceiling, disappearing into a ventilation shaft.

“Shit, it got away.”

“Doesn’t matter, it can’t do anything. Those darts can’t penetrate the suits. Leave it, it’s not important. Just tie them up. Good and tight this time.”

MANUAL OVERRIDE

Luca and Steph were tied up and strapped into two crew seats on the flight deck while the ship went through its docking maneuvers. But so far, none of the crew had realized Luca still wore the neural lace. She reckoned that being off-grid types, they were not familiar with the technology and didn't realize that it was she who controlled the drone.

Yet there was not much she could do unless she activated the interface, and that required using her hands that were bound tight with her arms strapped down by the seat harness. But even if she could somehow manage to reach up to it, what could the drone do? Its weapons' system was useless against thick EVA suits. Maybe she could get it to disable the ship, but that would mean the drone exposing itself, as it needed to use the interface on the cockpit console.

She twisted her pinned arms a little and reckoned she could get them free of the seat harness, but not while she was being watched. The best she could hope for was to wait for an opportunity, a time when they weren't being monitored, then try and figure out what she could get the drone to do, if anything.

There was a clunk followed by the sound of the locking bolts firing. When the ship was finally secured, the new captain swiveled around in his seat and looked at Luca.

"Seems these VanHeilding guys want you real bad. They've sent a few of their agents here to pick you up. So we're going to deliver you as promised, and then me and the guys are going to retire." He waved a hand around at the others. "No more of this bullshit ducking and diving."

He turned to one of the crew. "Becker, go check out the area outside. Make sure it's all nice and quiet." He gestured with a jerk of his head toward the airlock. Then he turned to the other crew member. "Dillon, go find that drone and destroy it. Can't be too many places it can hide on this ship."

The two crew closed their helmet visors and floated out of the

flight deck. The new captain returned to studying the ship's flight console. Luca and Steph exchanged glances. With the captain distracted and the two crew occupied with their respective tasks, Luca tested the harness that secured her to the seat. Her efforts were hampered by her constant checking of the captain's focus. He would shift in his seat, halting her efforts, only to resume his study of the navigation screen.

She finally wriggled her hands free, reached up to the back of her head, and activated the neural lace. As her mind began to make the connection, she shoved her hands back under the harness and focused on the drone.

"Where are you?"

A ship schematic blossomed into view in her mind's eye, highlighting Fly's location, deep within the network of ventilation ducts.

"One of them is looking for you, Fly."

"Yes, I have sensed him moving around, shining lights into ducts and alcoves. His efforts are futile, he will not find me."

"VanHeilding agents are coming, we don't have much time. We need to do something."

"I fear my options are limited. I could try and cut you free, but I might not have sufficient time before I'm spotted. However, I could disable the ship and prevent it from operating."

"We're leaving the ship, so that's no use, unless you could disable the airlock door."

"That might be possible. But it would only buy a little time as there is a manual override that..."

Luca lost the connection, as her mind was snapped back to the here and now by the captain's sudden movement. He was talking into his comms unit. "Listen up, guys. The VanHeilding people are on their way, they'll be here in a few minutes. Let's get these ladies unpacked and brought outside. We can do the handover there."

Luca struggled to reconnect with the drone, but her mind refused to disengage from the current threat. It was on hyper-alert and singularly focused on the moment.

The other two crew floated onto the flight deck at almost at the same time. The captain waved a hand at Luca and Steph. "Get them out of the seats. We'll take them outside. Come on, let's get this done."

They undid the seat harnesses and pulled them both out of their

seats, and began to push them out of the flight deck.

It was difficult for Luca to get orientated in the zero-gee environment with her hands and feet tied. She did manage to catch a look from Steph. One that said, *If you're going to do something with that drone, now would be a good time.*

The airlock cycled through its normal opening procedure, meaning that Fly had failed to disable it. It was her last hope; now there would be nothing between Luca and the agents that had come for her.

AGENTS

The airlock opened onto a short docking tunnel. Luca and Steph were pushed out and nudged forward. The tunnel quickly transitioned into a broader corridor and finally out into a wide warehousing area. It was dimly lit, and grubby with age and disuse.

Two agents were there to meet them, clad in clean, sharp urban attire complete with mag-boots that enabled them to secure themselves to most metal surfaces. Their look was a far cry from the grubbiness of the smugglers' EVA suits. And judging by the augmented reality headsets and the sophisticated weapons clipped to their waistbands, these were not people to be messed with.

"Vance, I presume?" one of them called out.

"Yes, that's me." The captain floated forward. "We have what you came for." He jerked his head at Luca.

"Good. Bring her over, we'll take it from here."

"Whoa, buddy, hold on there a moment. There's a small matter of payment."

The two agents looked at one another for a brief moment, as if silently discussing this issue. Finally, the black-haired dude spoke. "Your contract was to bring her to the lunar rendezvous coordinates. Payment was dependent on this being executed. Since you failed in your mission, the contract is null and void."

The atmosphere in the warehouse suddenly changed, as if it was experiencing a sudden decompression.

Vance raised an arm in front of Luca and slowly turned to the other crew. "Let's move the merchandise back out of the way for a moment while we discuss this."

Luca felt herself being pushed way back down into the connecting tunnel along with Steph. She tumbled a little before grabbing some cables that were floating out from the side wall. As she did, she managed to snag Steph with her feet. The doctor pulled herself along Luca's legs and grabbed onto the cables.

"Stay there, and don't even think of moving." One of the crew had followed them back and took up a position off to one side, a

little forward of them.

Ahead, Luca could see a lot of hand-waving and macho posturing by both groups. She couldn't hear much, but she didn't need to make out the words being exchanged to figure out that neither side was giving ground. It could be an opportunity, if only there wasn't a crew member right in front of them.

"Where's that drone?" Steph whispered. "Things could get messy here and give us an opportunity, maybe to sneak back onto the ship."

The prospect of escape, even if remote, made Luca's brain kick back into gear, and she felt the presence of the drone again.

As she suspected, it could not get the airlock disabled in time, but was now outside the ship clinging to the side of the access tunnel, just a few meters from where they clung to the cables.

"My apologies for not being able to assist you so far. But my ability to move fast in this environment is poor."

"Just hang back for a moment."

Luca shifted her position so she could whisper to Steph without being noticed. "It's here, in the tunnel, very close to us."

The doctor took a moment to look around her, examining the access tunnel structure. "Okay, I have an idea," she whispered in reply. "This guy is not holding onto anything, just floating there. So I'm going to kick him as hard as I can. The instant I do, you let go of that cable. He'll go tumbling forward and we'll go backward down the tunnel. Get that drone ready to jump on us and cut these bonds. Got it?"

Luca let the drone know the plan and then nodded to Steph.

She reacted almost instantly, bringing her knees up to her chest and kicking out hard with both feet, slamming them into the smuggler's back. Luca released her grip, and they went tumbling back down the access tunnel.

Luca lost all orientation as the tunnel spun around her. She heard shouts, then the *whomp, whomp* of a plasma weapon. "Shit, they're shooting at us. Fly, where the hell are you?"

She felt something grab onto her back, then scuttle around to her bound hands and cut the ties. She reached out, trying to find something to grab to stop the tumbling. A grab handle spun by her field of vision; she reached out and got a grip on it. Her body twisted back against the side wall of the access tunnel just as a plasma blast shot past her, dissipating harmlessly far off down at

the other end of the tunnel.

Her feet were now free and so was Steph, who still clung on to Luca's flight suit. Fly was back on the side wall, watching and waiting.

"Let's get to the ship." Steph pointed back up the tunnel to the docking port and started moving. Luca followed. Up ahead, she could see a firefight had broken out between the two groups. So they were not trying to shoot her or Steph, they were shooting at each other. A body floated down the tunnel behind them, its EVA suit burned and scorched on the chest.

Steph grabbed Luca's arm and pulled her into the ship's airlock; Fly scuttled in after them. They slammed the door shut and spun the locking mechanism.

"We have to get this ship the hell out of here. You think you can fly it?" Steph hit the button to open the inner door.

"Yeah, I think so."

They hurried to the flight deck and strapped themselves in. Fly connected to the interface, and Luca's mind was instantly assailed by ship data. Somewhere outside she thought she heard banging on the airlock door.

"Hurry," said Steph. "They're trying to get in."

Luca's mind raced, her synapses firing at quantum speed as she delved into the ship's systems, but something was different this time. Where before she had been overcome by fear, anxiety brought on by the overwhelming scale of the data coming at her, now she rode it like a surfer catching a wave. She found the docking systems, found that the ship had been put into lockdown by the orbiting station, and simply disabled it as if it were nothing. She felt the thump as it detached. The vernier thrusters fired, pushing the ship out into free space. By now, another part of her mind had initiated the navigation system to chart a course. She paused, brought herself out of the mind-machine interface for a brief second, and turned to Steph.

"Better get ready, we're going to the New World."

Steph simply nodded and tightened her seat harness.

Luca reentered the ship's systems and gave the command to initiate the primary drive. Instantly, they were slammed deep into their seats as the ship accelerated away from the Johnston Transit Orbital and out into interplanetary space.

CRAZY TIMES

Miranda would not reach New World One for many weeks, so Scott had desperately wanted to borrow a fast ship from Cyrus and head back to Earth and search for Luca. But in reality, what would that achieve? Both Miranda and Cyrus already had their own networks of people scouring the Johnston Transit Orbital for any sign of Luca or Steph. Not only that, but the QIs had assured him that if the pair were anywhere on that orbital, or even back on Earth, then they would find them. So what use would Scott be? In the end, it was Miranda who had finally persuaded him to stay put on New World One and wait for her. Part of him was a little flattered; maybe she just wanted to see him again. And if he was being true to himself, he had to admit that he really wanted to see her again, too—after all these years. In the end, he resisted the desire to journey to Earth and instead got on with what Cyrus regarded as the most important job on the habitat—getting the defense system up and running.

So here he was, encased in an EVA suit, attached by a tether to the exterior hull of New World One, overseeing the installation of a plasma cannon battery. It had been part of Cyrus's contract, and with the increasing paranoia permeating the Belt, he was understandably anxious to get it operational. He had been working on it for weeks; at least it kept his mind off things.

It didn't help that rumors were spreading of a well-armed ghost ship spotted on the far side of Luna and now heading for the Belt. But what troubled Scott more was that the QIs were being very circumspect about these rumors, meaning that they simply didn't know. This led him and many others to believe that the army of Node Runners utilized by the Seven had become far more adept at cloaking their activities within the Grid. All that could be relied on now was visual observation. And in the vast expanse of space, it would be impossible to find even the largest ship by simply eyeballing it.

Scott was keeping a close eye on his readouts as the first of two

plasma gun turrets was being floated into position. The second one would be mounted on the opposite side of the cylinder. But even when that was completed, there would still be at least another few weeks of work in connecting all the power and control systems before testing could begin. He was feeling the pressure. They all were.

His comms burst into life. “Scott, Cyrus here. I think I got something. You’d better hand over to someone there and meet me in the ops room as soon as you can.”

“You mean you got something on Luca and Steph?”

“Yeah, one of my guys came good and turned up something on Johnston. You need to take a look.”

“You know where they are?”

“No, but I think I know where they might be. Just get your ass down here.”

“Are they okay?”

“Scott, it’s best if I show you rather than over comms.”

“Okay, on my way.”

It took him the best part of an hour to hand over to his crew buddy, get back inside the habitat, take off his bulky EVA suit, then travel the three kilometers to the location of the ops room that Cyrus and the other main contractors used for planning and monitoring the complex construction process of New World One.

Like all structures in the habitat, it was a sprawling open-plan space populated with numerous people gathered around holo-tables and monitors. Scott looked around for Cyrus and eventually found him in a glass-walled side meeting room. He signaled to Scott to come in and join him.

“Scott, great, you’re here. Check this out.”

Scott moved over beside Cyrus and looked down at the video feed streaming on the table screen. “What am I looking at here?”

“This is a feed from an external source on the Johnston Transit Orbital, around four weeks ago.”

Scott studied the feed. As far as he could tell from the grainy images, it was focused on a derelict sector of the vast orbital—no lights, no activity, totally devoid of life. “I don’t see anything going on here.”

“Perfect place for a smuggler to dock, don’t you think?”

Scott glanced up at Cyrus with raised eyebrows. “You mean...”

Cyrus cut him off with a wave at the screen. "Look at this." He tapped a few icons, the image zoomed in, and Scott could now see a blurry image of a small ship docked to the derelict sector.

"That's Weismann's ship. The guy who was supposed to take Luca and Steph off Earth."

"Holy shit, Cyrus. You found them. This is great. Are they okay?"

Cyrus stood up and turned to face Scott. "Let me back up a bit and give you the full story. I had some contacts of mine do some investigating on Captain Weismann. He's a good guy, someone I trust, so the question is what happened to the mission. Anyway, we started by checking out old sectors in the orbital we knew he used in the past." Cyrus pointed at the screen. "When he checked out this sector, he discovered three bodies. And no, none are Luca or Steph. Just three unknowns. Then we did some background checks, and it turns out all three of them had been on Weismann's crew at various times in the past."

Scott looked down at the screen again. "What happened? And where's Luca?"

"There was a firefight of some kind. All three died from plasma blasts, and the bodies hastily hidden. It was just a bit of luck that my man found them. But whatever happened didn't last very long, as the ship departed almost as soon as it arrived."

"You think Luca and Steph are still on it?"

"Looks that way."

"This is great work, Cyrus. So where are they now?"

Cyrus gave a wry smile. "Ah, good question." It was clear the engineer was relishing this exposé. "I recruited the help of Aria to do some analysis now that we had some data on the ship. You have to remember that this ship is off-grid, so the QIs had nothing to work with. But Aria analyzed all visual data-feeds in and around the Johnston Transit Orbital during that period." He turned back to the screen. "Have a look at this."

A new feed showed mostly space with just a small section of the orbital visible in the bottom left corner. As it played, Scott could see the same ship come into view, power up its main engines, and disappear into the void. "Where are they going?"

"Aria has given a high probability that the ship is heading for deep space. And given that Mars is currently on the other side of the sun, there's nothing else out there until they hit the Belt."

“The Belt? But that’s an old orbit hopper. There’s no way that can do interplanetary travel.”

“It might look like a bucket of bolts, but it has a VASMIR main engine, so it’s well capable of entering deep space.”

Scott stood up, scratched his chin, and started to pace around. “So they’re heading to us.” He stopped suddenly. “Any comms? Have you tried contacting the ship?”

“Nada. Both Aria and Homer checked all the comms activity for that region. Nothing. But we wouldn’t expect anything until it comes into range of a relay beacon.”

“They could be in trouble, Cyrus. I need to head out there and find them, and find them now.”

“Whoa, hold up. You would never find a ship that small out there unless you crash into it.”

“I know, but I gotta try, Cyrus. I can’t sit here and do nothing now that we have an idea where they are. Have you sent this to Miranda?”

“Yeah, just after I called you. No word back yet. She’s still another three days away.”

Scott stayed silent for a moment, thinking.

“Listen, Scott, there’s no point in you heading out into the void, not unless you have a reasonable set of coordinates for their location.” Cyrus moved over to a holo-table and tapped a few icons to bring up a 3D schematic of the local sector of Belt space. “There are at least three relay beacons covering most of the approach vectors from Earth’s position when they departed. But just bear in mind that even if the ship passes one, that doesn’t mean we’ll pick it up.”

“How so?”

“Remember, it’s off-grid. So unless they want to relay messages and make a connection to the beacon, we won’t know if they’re there.”

“Hmmm...and if they are trying to keep hidden, then they’re probably not going to expose themselves.”

“Exactly. Who knows what else is out there?”

“You’re not still going on about that ghost ship, are you?”

“I don’t know, Scott. Aria is pretty spooked. Homer, too. I’ve never seen the QIs that uncertain about anything in my life. As you can imagine, it’s a little disconcerting.”

“You think this so-called ghost ship might be chasing them

down?”

“Anything is possible, Scott. It could be heading our way, there could be more than one, who knows. But what I do know is it’s not good. Something major is about to happen. That what’s got the QIs so cagey. They sense something is going on, but not what it is or where it’s going to go down.”

Scott shook his head. “Crazy times, Cyrus. I feel as if nothing makes sense anymore. The old certainties are gone now that we can’t rely on the QI network to keep a lid on things.” Scott glanced back at the schematic and pointed to one of the beacon markers. “How long would it take to get to any of these beacons here?”

Cyrus leaned in. “Three days, maybe less if you were prepared to black out under heavy acceleration.”

“And how soon do you think Weismann’s ship will come into range?”

“Hard to say, but it should be soon. They may already be in range.”

Scott nodded. “Now what? Do I head out there, or wait for them to get here and try to send a message?”

“Maybe do both. Get ready to go, I’ll get you a fast ship. Then wait a day or two to see if there’s any contact. If not, then head out. But remember, you’re unlikely to find them by just wandering around out there.”

Scott gave out a long sigh. “Yeah, I know that. But put yourself in my shoes. If there is even the smallest chance of finding them, then I have to take it.”

THIRST

Apart from the initial ten-hour acceleration burn, the first few days of the journey from the Johnston Transit Orbital had been relatively easy, and both Luca and Dr. Rayman began to relax a little.

But soon their attentions turned to the issue of food and water, and how to make the meager provisions last the next forty-four days they estimated it would take to reach New World One. Steph spent some time analyzing the nutrients available and rationed out the food as best she could. She presented Luca with a minuscule portion, explaining to her that this was it for the next twenty-four hours, then went to great lengths to reassure her that it was possible to live for thirty or so days without food. This did not comfort Luca in any way; it simply underscored her own acceptance that it was going to be a very long and hungry trip.

Although the average healthy human could theoretically live for weeks without food, water was a different matter entirely. They kept the environment and the ship cool so that they would not be wasting water through perspiration, even though the ship had a reasonably efficient recycling system. But based on the reserves they had on board, it became obvious that they would be slowly dehydrating as the days passed. Even the best recycling system could not produce more water than it collected.

By day seven, they were both finding it difficult to focus on anything other than food—it was all Luca thought about, and almost the only thing she and Steph talked about. They spent many days sharing stories of memorable meals and culinary delights. But by day fourteen, all this had passed as they both settled into survival mode, barely moving or even speaking, expending minimal energy.

On day thirty-eight, the water finally ran out. Luca was strapped into the pilot seat on the flight deck when Steph floated in and handed her a small metal flask.

“Here you go, this is the last I could wring out of the recycler.

It's only a few milliliters."

Luca twisted off the cap and took a sip. The water was brackish with a stale taste. Nonetheless, it felt like nectar from the gods as it made its way down her parched throat. "A few sips are not going to last us six more days."

Steph shrugged. She was a doctor, after all—she knew the score. They sat there quietly for a time, each deep in their own thoughts.

Luca's attention eventually returned to the 3D navigational schematic of their current position that blossomed out of the central holo-screen. In one quadrant, a small section of the asteroid belt was depicted with a marker at one end, indicating the location of the dwarf planet, Ceres. Another marker at the far end indicated the location of New World One—their ultimate destination. They were almost there. It was only six long, hard days away.

The projection flickered a little as Steph suddenly poked her finger at a marker, seemingly positioned in the middle of nowhere. "What's that?"

Luca glanced at the projection. "I don't know. There's a few of them. See, here's another one." She tapped the projection to highlight it.

"Those look like relay beacons to me," said Steph. "And that one is almost directly in our travel path." She tapped the marker, and immediately a cascade of data spewed out on a side monitor.

"What's a relay beacon?" Luca leaned over and tried reading the data on screen.

"Think of it as a Grid Node, except in space. They're used for routing data and communications as well as navigation."

"Are you saying it can broadcast our location?"

"I don't think so, not unless we connect with it. But to be honest, Luca, I'm not sure about that. What I do know is that these beacons are technically very complex and need regular maintenance. They're autonomous, but all have accommodation for maintenance crew visits. However, the most interesting thing is they are generally very well provisioned." She looked over at Luca. "That means food and water."

At the mention of this, Luca perked up. "Food and water?"

"Yep." Steph reached down to the holo-screen and adjusted the navigation map, zooming in on the relay beacon. "I'm just guessing here, but it looks to be around a day away."

Luca studied the marker on the 3D navigation schematic with all

the intensity of a hungry wolf.

“If we wanted to go there, then you would have to do that thing you do... You know, with the drone.”

Luca glanced over at Steph. “I reckon I could do that. I think I just have to set the navigation parameters for that location, and the ship’s systems will plot a course and calculate the burn we’ll need to slow down—which is going to be pretty hardcore. If we did ten hours leaving the Transit Orbital, we’ll need at least the same.” Luca looked at the marker again. “The only thing is, if we were to dock at that beacon, would we pop up on the Grid?”

Steph thought about this for a moment. “I really don’t know, but I guess we’d show up somewhere, even if it’s just on some log for whomever’s in charge of maintaining that facility.”

“Which means,” said Luca, “that anybody looking for us would know exactly where we are.”

“I know, it’s a risk. But even though we’re only six days away from New World One, that’s a very long time with just a few milliliters of water between us. We may not survive, and even if we do, we may not be in a fit state to deal with any eventualities that might crop up. So yeah, it’s a risk. But knowing where we are and getting to us are two different things entirely, and that facility is most likely in the domain of the QI, Homer, on Ceres.” Steph raised a finger just to emphasize the point.

“Screw it, we’ll go. I’m too malnourished and dehydrated to care anymore.” Luca tapped the back of her skull to activate the neural net and get the show on the road.

“Yeah, me too,” said Steph with a sigh.

BEACON 23

Luca had become quite adept at interfacing with the ship's systems during the many weeks they had been on board. She had little else to do, and it kept her mind off the hunger. So it took her no time to connect via the drone and set the necessary navigation parameters for the relay beacon. The ship slowly began to rotate itself 180 degrees so that the engines now faced the direction of travel. This maneuver gave Luca and Steph just enough time to strap themselves down tight. When the retro-burn finally kicked in, Luca was slammed back into her seat, pinned there with the extreme force of the acceleration. They were pulling a lot of gees and would be unable to move for the next ten or so hours.

Sometime during the burn, Luca blacked out and only came to when Steph jabbed her with a shot of something from the meager medical kit she carried.

"Here, drink this." Steph held the flask with the last of the water to Luca's lips. "Drink it all, there's only a few drops anyway."

The fuzziness in her brain started to clear and Luca began to take stock of her surroundings. "Are we there? Did we make it?"

"Yeah, we made it—see." Steph moved back to her seat and Luca could now see the silhouette of the relay beacon looming large through the flight deck window. Any thoughts she had of staying off-grid and keeping a low profile vanished; all she could think about now was food and water.

She stared fixedly at the navigation beacon, watching it grow in size as the ship slowly approached. She felt like a weary traveler lost in the desert, now crawling her way inch by inch to a lonely, isolated diner by the edge of a dusty road.

As they moved alongside the docking port, the cockpit navigation console suddenly came to life. The ship now began to negotiate the final procedure with the beacon. Luca glanced over at Steph. "I presume this is the moment that we pop up on the Grid?"

Steph looked at the data scrolling down the screen. "I guess so.

We'd better be quick."

Such was their impatience to find food and water that they were already floating beside the airlock, listening for every sound, even before the docking sequence had finished. As soon as the side panel illuminated green, Luca punched the button to enter.

The outer door opened directly into a comparatively large circular living space designed for a maintenance crew to lay over for a few days. It didn't take them long to find the galley and start cracking open a storage container that was clearly marked with a large water droplet and the words *drinking water* in several languages. Luca pulled out two pouches, lobbed one over to Steph, broke the seal on the other, and started to drink. As the cool, clear liquid began soothing her parched throat, she reckoned that it was the most delicious thing she had ever tasted in her life.

"Go easy with that, Luca," Steph said as she broke the seal on the water pouch. "Don't drink too much or you'll end up throwing it up. Just take a few sips at a time."

Luca's next target was a pouch of freeze-dried noodles. She broke the tab to activate the inbuilt hydrator and chemical heater. But she couldn't wait the two minutes it took to finish processing, and instead broke it open and started shoving the dry, brittle noodles into her mouth. Nevertheless, it was the second most amazing thing she had ever tasted.

They spent the next half hour eating and drinking, barely saying a word other than expressing just how delicious everything tasted.

Steph wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "I suppose we'd better get going. It wouldn't do to stay here too long."

"Yeah, we can grab some supplies and bring them back to the ship. We're not going to need that much, it's only another five days to get there."

"I was thinking..." Steph began gathering up a couple of food containers. "Now that we've probably popped up on the Grid, maybe we should just send a message to Cyrus on New World One, let him know we're alive and well and heading that way."

"You think that would be safe?"

"If we wanted to be safe, then we wouldn't be doing this." She waved a hand around. "My guess is they know where we are now, so sending a message to Cyrus isn't going to make any difference."

They headed back to the ship. Steph stowed the provisions while Luca strapped herself into the pilot seat, activated her neural lace, and connected to the ship's systems. But as she entered the data-stream, she sensed a disturbance—something was not quite right. Luca sought out the docking subsystem and instructed it to undock the ship—but nothing happened.

What the heck? Her first reaction was that she was not concentrating properly; she was still very weak from the journey. She tried again—still nothing. She probed the drone for its analysis.

“Any idea what’s going on with the ship systems, Fly? I can’t undock from the beacon.”

“I suspect we’re being hacked.”

“Hacked?” A momentary surge of panic rose up in Luca. “How can that be possible? Who’s doing this?”

“The ship is connected to the Grid via the relay beacon. So theoretically, anyone with sufficient knowledge and skill could gain access.”

“But we’re within the domain of the QI on Ceres.” Yet even as Luca said these words, she realized she could not sense its presence.

“The QI was destroyed in an attack on Ceres approximately two hours ago, according to the newsfeeds I am accessing.”

Luca suddenly lost the neural connection, such was her shock. Steph, now strapped into her seat, could sense something was wrong. “What is it, Luca? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

Luca’s head slowly rotated and faced the doctor, her mouth open, her eyes wide. “The QI, Homer...it’s been...destroyed.”

Steph’s face morphed into a look of incredulity. “Are you sure? How do you know?”

Luca tried to concentrate and reconnect with the ship, but she was not in the right frame of mind. “Fly?” she said out loud. “Can you display one of those newsfeeds on the main monitor?”

“Holy crap.” The doctor’s reaction was instant. On screen, an aerial view of Rongo City on Ceres showed what remained of one of the city’s research habitats, the one housing the QI, Homer.

“Oh my God, they actually did it. They took out a QI.” Steph looked over at Luca. “We’d better get going, we can’t hang around here any longer.”

“I can’t—the ship won’t undock. I tried, but it just won’t disengage. Fly thinks we’ve been hacked.”

“This is bad, Luca. Real bad. They must know we’re here...and

are preventing us from leaving.” She then looked directly at Luca. “That means they’re coming for us...for you. You’ve got to get us out of here.”

Luca shook her head. “I’ve tried, but it just won’t respond.”

Steph remained silent for a moment, then leaned over and spoke in a low, calm tone. “Listen, Luca, you need to understand what they will do to you if they find us still here. You have to try and get the ship free of this facility. You need to do whatever it takes.”

Luca lowered her head and gave a slight nod. “Okay, I’ll try.”

THE DATA-STREAM

Luca slowly regained her composure, reached up to the back of her head, and activated the neural lace. Immediately, she could feel the tendrils moving across her skull, seeking out connections. Her mind now focused on Fly. “Can I still get a message to New World One?” she asked.

“No, I’m afraid not. All communication must be relayed through the beacon, and the data paths are inoperable.”

Yet Luca already knew that this would be the answer, so she moved past Fly and into the ship’s own data-stream. She had become very familiar with it, having spent so much time interfacing with the systems over the last couple of weeks. So much so, that she could tell what was native data and what was alien. She sifted through the data, focusing on the foreign invasion. In her mind’s eye, she could see it as fuzzy, crude tendrils, in complete contrast to the elegant filaments of native data. It had to be coming in through the ship’s interface with the beacon. Luca paused for a beat as she steeled herself for the inevitable onslaught of data that awaited her on the far side of that interface. When she was ready, she dived in and followed it.

Her mind exploded with a billion particles of data. They fizzed and danced as the beacon relayed communications to and from its network of sister beacons scattered throughout the solar system. Luca was mesmerized by it. She had assumed that entering the beacon’s data-stream would be too much for her, overload her mind like her first encounter with the ship’s own systems. But this was a vision of harmony and order. This was beauty, this was poetry.

Yet to undock the ship she needed to follow the trail, taking her deeper into the network, beyond the beacon. As she got closer to its source, she began to sense a presence, another human in the data-stream. She recoiled slightly. The thought of someone else in the system, or possibly more, meant only one thing—Node Runners, probably the very same people who attacked the Grid Node on Earth and the QI on Ceres.

But they sensed her, too, and a mass of new tendrils suddenly snaked out of the data-stream, seeking her out. Luca retreated; they followed. She retreated further, recoiling against the probing filaments that were hunting her down. She had no choice but to disconnect from the system.

Her breathing was labored, her heart rate was elevated, and she was sweating profusely.

Steph leaned over and gave her that look all doctors give when they're very concerned. "Luca, are you okay?" She put a hand on her shoulder.

"They're in there, in the system. Trying to find me."

"Who? Who's in there, Luca?"

"Ghosts, Node Runners. Lots of them."

"Just take a few deep breaths, calm yourself down."

Luca followed the doctor's advice, the panic receded, and she could feel her heart rate dropping. "I'm okay." Luca waved a hand at Steph. "Just give me a minute to get myself together."

Steph handed her a pouch of water. "Here, drink some. You need to rehydrate."

Luca felt better with each sip. "I need to go back in. We have to get out of here."

"Are you sure you're up to it?"

Luca cocked her head to one side. "Do I have a choice?"

Steph screwed her face up a little. "Be careful."

Luca gave her a smile. "Don't worry, I'll try not to fry my brain."

She tapped the neural lace again and reentered the data-stream. But this time she hung back, simply observing, trying to get a bird's-eye view and building a picture of what the Node Runners were doing. She saw their tendrils snaking out in all directions into the ship's subsystems. Luca followed them, hanging back, not going as deep as she had before. She was like a hunter hiding in the tall grass, observing her prey, waiting for her moment.

They had disabled the docking mechanism, rendering it inoperable—this was why the ship could not leave. But Luca also sensed them actively seeking out other systems, probing the engine drive, life-support, and power. They were trying to do more than just prevent the ship from leaving. Yet she could now see that all these attacks originated via the comms network. If she could block that, then maybe she could regain control of the ship long enough to disengage it from the beacon. And once disengaged, the Node

Runners could not get back in again. She circled around the comms port, approaching it from different network nodes, building an understanding of its operational parameters.

But they spotted her, sensed what she was trying to do, and now focused their attention toward her. Yet this time, rather than retreating, Luca met them head-on. They were not expecting her to fight back, and she could sense their trepidation, perhaps even a little fear.

She pressed her advantage, pushing at them. They were slow to respond, but when they did, it was with greater intensity. Yet Luca repelled their efforts. As they opened up new data gateways, Luca closed them. When they tried to reroute their attacks, she blocked them. One by one, she closed down the avenues by which they could enter and gain access to the ship's system.

By the time she closed in on the primary comms port, she could sense that a great many more Node Runners were being brought to bear on the task of fighting her off. Luca was finding it more difficult to push them back. She made one final effort and focused all her mental energy on getting control of the comms port and closing it.

Something snapped, and the Node Runners' attack suddenly collapsed. Luca felt herself tumbling through the comms port, carried by the momentum of her focus. Her mind sped past the cacophonous data-stream of the beacon, out through its comms link, and straight into the mind of the very last Node Runner who was trying to fight her off.

She halted, not sure what she was doing here—in the mind of another human. Yet it fascinated her, drew her in, and so she began to explore it—more from a benign curiosity than for any other reason. She probed deeper, seeking out some understanding of this Node Runner. It was clumsily trying to hide, to obscure its knowledge and memory from her inquiry. Luca swept aside its flimsy defenses, and then she saw it—a vision of a vast cargo hold, filled with row upon row of weaponized attack droids, all waiting to be unleashed.

Luca pulled back in horror, trying to digest what she had just seen. Was it real, or was it just some figment of the Node Runner's imagination? She couldn't be sure.

As Luca began to extricate her mind from the swirling sea of intersystem data, she paused momentarily within the beacon's

network long enough to disentangle the spaceship from its mechanical grip. Part of her sensed it separate and drift free, although she could not be precisely sure if this had happened already, was currently happening, or had yet to happen. Nevertheless, she was certain that she had instigated the ship's release—she was sure of it.

Yet this strange time dilation that she was now experiencing intrigued her, so her mind began to explore it. Tentatively at first, probing the outer edges until she realized it was her own mind she was exploring and not some data-stack or system AI.

But it was not the crude stuff of memories, or the cumbersome verbiage of thoughts, nor was it some glacially slow philosophical pondering. No, this was brilliance and clarity—an enlightenment of sorts. She found it both exhilarating and eternal, like she had finally arrived at a place that was her destiny. It enveloped her, wrapped her up in a warm dreamlike blanket, and for the first time in her life, she felt a deep, satisfying contentment. She belonged.

GHOST IN THE GRID

For a long time, there was nothing but stunned silence in the Sanato Corp. operations center on New World One as Scott, Cyrus, and some of his people all tried to come to terms with what had just happened on Ceres. Miranda also joined them from the Perception via a video link. She was still a few days away from arriving, but was already being pressed by the governing body of New World for her help in bolstering the habitat's defenses, as the new plasma cannons were not yet operational.

Many had been expecting something after the attack on the Grid Node on Earth. Yet the complete destruction of the QI, Homer on Ceres was beyond most people's ability to comprehend. They all knew they were witnessing a paradigm shift in the order of things. With the QI gone, this entire region of the Belt was vulnerable, including New World One.

"Any word from Solomon?" Scott said as he paced up and down along the viewing window that ran the length of the room, stopping every now and again to check the new alerts that popped up on the main monitor.

"Europa is quite a distance from us at the moment," Cyrus said as he too monitored the alerts coming in. "It will take time for a message to get here."

"Do they know if this was some homegrown terrestrial sabotage, or did it come from orbit?" Scott stopped his pacing. "I mean, do they know if there is a ship out there?"

One of Cyrus's people, a tech by the name of Jinty, jerked a finger at some data on her screen. "They're saying it looks like it's a direct missile strike from orbit...which would suggest it came from a ship. Reports are still sketchy," she continued. "Some are suggesting that a big freighter simply popped up out of nowhere. But that might be just a glitch."

"I don't believe this." Cyrus gestured in frustration. "Ceres attacked, Homer destroyed, and nobody seems to have a goddamn clue how it happened or who's behind this."

“We all know who's behind this.” Miranda now joined the discussion. “Same as the destruction of the Grid Node back on Earth. This is clearly the work of the Seven and that megalomaniac Fredrick VanHeilding with his Node Runners. If he has a ship out there with a bunch of those weirdos on board, then it's no wonder people can't find it. The only way you can see that ship is if you crash into it.”

“Optical.” Cyrus raised a finger in the air as if some genius idea had just popped into his head.

“Optical? What the heck you talking about?” said Scott.

“An optical telescope. It's not on the Grid, not digital, it doesn't need to be connected to the data-stream, it just uses light waves. They can't hide from that.”

“Seriously, Cyrus. Does anybody use optical telescopes anymore? That technology hasn't been around for centuries. Nobody uses them. And even if you did have one, you would need to know the precise point in space to look at.”

“This is all irrelevant,” Miranda snapped as she leaned into the camera, making her face almost fill the screen. “You need to get it into your heads that this is a tactical strike to make this entire area of space defenseless.” She waved a hand around for emphasis. “Anything connected to the Grid is now at the mercy of those... Node Runners. That includes New World One. My guess is that's exactly where they're heading next—that's the prize, that's what they want. With the New World, VanHeilding and the other six families effectively have total control over the resources of the Belt.”

“How long before those plasma cannons are operational?” Scott looked over at Cyrus. The engineer was sitting down, his head lowered, with the fingertips of one hand pressed up against his temple. Scott knew what this meant—Cyrus was accessing some data or communicating with someone using his neural interface. Yet Scott knew from the look on his face that he was struggling to comprehend something.

He was about to ask if everything was okay when Cyrus stood up and looked from Scott to Miranda and back again. “I just got something in, something a bit...well, weird. It's Luca.”

He tapped on the side of his visor, then swept his hand out to send the data onto the main monitor.

A series of strange images cascaded across the screen. Scott

found it hard to decipher what he was seeing. It looked like a factory floor, or a warehouse, or maybe even the cargo hold of some large freighter. Wherever it was, it was packed tight with row upon row of military robots—hundreds of them.

“Holy crap.” Cyrus began fiddling with some controls to squeeze more definition from the images. “That looks like a goddamn droid army.”

“What's this got to do with Luca?” Miranda's face was now so close to the camera that her image on screen was almost a blur.

“It's...hard to explain.” Cyrus shook his head a little. “This data came from Luca on Weismann's orbit hopper. It's docked at Beacon 23, at the border of Belt space. But...” He looked confused. “The weird thing is it just suddenly arrived on the data-stack, like as if...” And here he paused for a moment, unsure of what to say. “As if she was in the system, in the data-stream, like a Node Runner.”

“Luca? Are you sure?” Scott thought his old buddy was losing it.

“Is the ship still at the beacon?” Miranda had moved back a little from the camera and looked to be studying the images on the feed at her end.

“I don't know,” said Cyrus. “Possibly. This just arrived a few moments ago.”

“Beacon 23, that's around three days away from here.” Jinty brought up a 3D schematic of that region of space on the main holo-table.

“I'm going to alter course and head for that beacon,” said Miranda. “The Perception could get there in five days.”

Scott thought for a moment. “Wait, Miranda. Let's think this through. Maybe it's better if I go. It would be quicker from here. Cyrus, do you have a ship I can borrow?”

“Sure do. I've got a very fast rock hopper. It should get you there in two days.”

“Then that's it,” said Scott. “I'll head for that relay beacon and try to locate Weismann's ship.”

Miranda looked frustrated. Scott could tell she was itching to do something, but she was still too far away. “Okay.” She nodded. “But please find her, Scott.”

“I will, you better believe it.” He turned back to Cyrus. “You'd better get those cannons operational as fast as humanly possible. If New World One is the target, then we've only got a few days before that ghost ship gets here from Ceres.”

“Jeez, don’t I know.”

“Scott.” Miranda leaned into the camera. “If you find Luca and Steph, maybe it’s not a good idea to bring them back to the New World. It could be a shitstorm there.”

“First thing’s first, Miranda. I need to find them, then we can figure out what to do.”

SECOND SHIP

Cyrus wasn't joking when he said the rock hopper was fast. Scott nearly passed out immediately after he punched the coordinates for Beacon 23 into the navigation system and hit initiate. What followed were three hours of the most intense acceleration he had ever experienced. Next time, he would dial back on the settings; perhaps maximum thrust was a bit extreme.

He came out of the burn period to a number of messages from Cyrus on the comms. They were using encrypted X Band. It was old-school, but it was off-grid so not as susceptible to being intercepted.

The New World people were working hard to take the habitat off the Grid and shut down all possible routes into its systems. But that was not as simple as it sounded. Most of the technology relied on connections to external data sources, and disconnection generally meant that they ceased to function. No one had ever considered this when they were designing the systems. No one in their right mind could have imagined any reason that a facility might need to operate independent of the data-stream.

But the meat of Cyrus's message was to let him know that the VanHeilding ship had now popped up on the Grid—it was no longer trying to hide itself. Presumably, since the QI had been eliminated, they now felt safe enough to expose themselves. But the good news, if you could call it that, was the ship hadn't moved from its position in Ceres orbit. So maybe New World One wasn't a target—yet.

They had also identified the ship as being one of two VanHeilding ships spotted loitering on the far side of Luna many weeks ago. Meaning that there might be a second VanHeilding ship out there somewhere. The bottom line was that Scott should be careful, as he may have company.

By the time he came out of the final retro-burn to slow the ship down, it had been a little over twenty hours since his departure from the New World. Outside, through the ship's forward window, he could see the relay beacon dead ahead. He was still some way

out, so he brought up a view on the main monitor and zoomed in—then he saw it. A beat-up old orbit hopper floating in space around a kilometer from the main structure. *Damn*, he thought. *Dead in the water. Not good.*

He tried hailing it, but there was no answer. So over the next few hours, he guided his ship up close and did a quick visual pass of the craft. There was no damage that he could see other than the odd scorch mark here and there that may or may not have been the result of a plasma blast. But it all looked superficial and historic. Simply scars from its life as a smugglers' ship. There was nothing to indicate that it had suffered any recent physical damage.

Scott set his own ship to maintain a close stationary position relative to the dead orbit hopper, unfastened his seat harness, and made his way to the airlock, where he donned a heavy-duty miner's EVA suit that he'd found in one of the side lockers. He clipped on the helmet and checked the suit had enough resources. Finally, he stowed a compact plasma pistol he had brought with him into a cargo pocket, stepped into the airlock, and hit the button for decompression.

Before the outer door opened, he attached himself to a spooling tether to make sure he wouldn't get separated from the ship. Even if he got disoriented, he would be able to pull himself back to safety.

The outer door slid open and Scott found himself looking directly at the roof of the orbit hopper. He pushed himself out of the airlock, crossing the distance between the two ships in a few seconds. He aimed for a cluster of hand holds on one side of the secondary airlock, but he was moving faster than he had planned and hit the outer hull hard, yet managed to grab on before he bounced off again. "Sloppy," he said to himself. Anyone inside the ship would have heard the thump when he hit.

Scott took a second to gather himself and then moved, hand over hand, to the manual airlock mechanism. As he turned it, the outer door began to crack open, inch by inch. After a few moments, it was wide enough for him to crawl through. He unclipped the tether, attaching it to one of the exterior handholds, then proceeded to wind the door closed from the inside.

When it finally shut and repressurized, he pressed the button to open the inner door, and was immediately hit by a plasma blast, square on the chest. He slammed back into the outer airlock door, bounced off, and started tumbling about, completely losing his

orientation. Fortunately, the tough EVA suit took the blast and he was uninjured. But it took him a second or two to orient himself, extract his plasma pistol, and seek out the assailant. Who turned out to be none other than Dr. Stephanie Rayman, wearing a look of complete shock on her face, probably equal to his own.

He put away his weapon and flipped open his visor. "Steph, glad to see you're still alive."

"Scott? Oh god, I'm sorry. I didn't know who the hell was scraping around out there on the hull trying to get in. Are you okay?"

"Fine. Fortunately, I'm wearing a miner's suit." He tapped the chest plate. "Tougher than an asteroid."

Steph reached a hand out and grabbed his arm. "I can't believe it's you. I don't know how you found us, Scott. But I'm very glad you did, I thought I was going to die out here."

They floated out of the airlock. "Where's Luca?"

A concerned look came over Steph's face. "She's here. She's okay, but..."

"What? What's wrong?"

Steph jerked her head. "Come, I'll bring you to her."

They moved across the cargo hold to a row of sleeping bays used for grabbing some shuteye in zero-gee. Luca was zipped up in one of the bays. Scott hardly recognized her. She looked so much older than he remembered, even though the last visual communication they had had was only seven months ago.

"Is she sleeping?" Scott asked as he floated in closer to her. "Is she okay?"

"She's in a catatonic state, has been for a few days now."

"What happened out here, Steph? Where's Weismann, the captain?"

Steph let out a long sigh. "It's a long story, Scott. For starters, Weismann is dead, murdered by his own crew."

"What...dead? Who's piloting the ship?"

Steph pointed at the sleeping figure zipped up in the bay. "Luca. That's why I was stuck here—until you showed up."

"Since when did Luca know how to pilot a spacecraft?"

"Like I said, it's long story. Weismann's crew realized there was a big payout for her, so they did away with the captain and were planning on handing us over to VanHeilding. Fortunately, we escaped. But neither of us could pilot a ship. That's when Luca

started using a neural lace that Athena had given her to interface with the ship's data-stream. She figured it out and got us this far."

"But Luca hates anything to do with mind-machine interfaces. It freaks her out, literally."

"Yeah, well, she got pretty good at it. Until we ran out of food and water. So we took a chance on docking at this relay beacon. That's when they found us. Somehow, they took over the ship's systems so we couldn't undock."

"When was this?"

"Around two days ago. Luca managed to do her thing and release the ship, but...she never woke up. I've tried everything I can think of to revive her, but I have extremely limited medical resources here. We've just been floating out here ever since."

"Can she be moved?"

"Yes. Other than being somewhat malnourished and dehydrated, she's physically okay, as far as I can tell. It's just...like she simply doesn't want to wake up."

Scott removed his helmet and took a deep breath. "We need to get you out of here, and quick. They'll be coming soon, so we don't have much time. We should get back to New World One. It's the closest place with the best medical facilities."

"Is it true the QI on Ceres has been destroyed?" Steph asked as she began to unzip Luca from the sleeping bay.

"Yes. Unbelievable, isn't it? Who would have thought that was possible just a few months ago?"

"This shit's just got serious." She shook her head a little.

"It sure has. They destroyed it with a missile strike from orbit. VanHeilding has been using his Node Runners to hide the ship from the QIs. But now that Homer is gone, they're out in the open. Cyrus has been putting together some old-school tech to track the ship while keeping off-grid. So far, the ship hasn't moved—it's still in orbit around Ceres. But the feeling is that they're planning an attack on New World One."

"And you want to go back there?" Steph's eyes widened.

"It's fine, Steph. They've got a very good defense system that can blow that VanHeilding ship into atoms. Miranda should also be there by the time we get back. And her ship, the Perception, is armed to the teeth. So all we have to do is get back there."

"Sounds like you're not sure about that."

Scott paused for a moment. "Look, this could be nothing, but

Cyrus suspects there's another VanHeilding ship out here somewhere. That's why we need to get moving."

"Well, let's get going then." She jerked her head toward the airlock.

"You get whatever you need packed up. I'm going to dock the two ships together so we can transfer without the need for EVA suits."

Scott looked back at the sleeping figure of Luca, reached out, and touched her arm. "It's okay, kiddo, we got you now." He turned to head for the airlock, but hesitated for a beat. "Eh...Luca didn't say anything to you about...battle droids?"

Steph's eyes widened. "Now you're beginning to freak me out. Battle droids? No. Why?"

Scott waved a hand. "Ah, it's probably nothing. Never mind."

RETURN

As Scott exited the orbit hopper's airlock and came back out into the vacuum of space, he couldn't help but scan the heavens looking for any telltale signs of a VanHeilding ship. Not that it was possible to spot anything unless it was right on top of him. But nonetheless, he had an uneasy feeling as he crossed the distance to his shuttle.

A short time later, he docked the two ships together and once he was satisfied that the connection was secure, he allowed both environments to equalize. Then he took off the bulky EVA suit and opened the airlock between the two craft. Steph had already moved Luca out from her sleeping bay and now floated her through the airlocks. Between the two of them they gently transferred Luca into Scott's ship and strapped her securely to one of the passenger seats.

Steph was just about to fold herself into one of the other seats when she stopped. "Wait, I forgot something. I need to go back and get it."

"What? Don't take too long, gotta get out of here as soon as possible."

She returned less than a minute later holding the small robotic drone.

"What's that thing?" Scott said as he shut the airlock door.

"It's a semi-autonomous drone, controlled by a neural lace. Athena built this for Luca. I think it was kind of a birthday present." She held it up so Scott could get a good look at it. "Without this, we never would have made it this far. It's what Luca used to control the ship."

Scott could tell from just a cursory look that this was clearly a sophisticated bit of tech. "Athena gave this to Luca knowing that using a neural lace sends her into a fit of panic?" Scott asked as he strapped himself into the pilot seat.

"Listen, Scott. There's something you should know about Luca, something that I've only begun to realize over the last few days."

Scott prepared to decouple the shuttle from the battered old orbit hopper. "What's that?"

“You know that her DNA had been...tweaked by the VanHeilding Corporation, back when Miranda was captive?”

“Yeah, so? Don’t tell me she’s gonna live for two hundred years?”

“No, not that. Although, she might. But we’ve been monitoring her development over the years, keeping an eye out for any... anomalies. And for a long time, there didn’t seem be anything out of the ordinary. Apart from maybe her hyper-sensitivity to electromagnetic energy. Yet what I’ve seen her do in the last few days leads me to believe that this hyper-sensitivity is a symptom of something deeper.” She held up the drone again, examining it briefly. “This thing has a shard of the QI, Athena imbedded within it. Apparently, when Luca was interacting with the data-stream, it came online and it told her some things...things that Athena knew about her, or had suspected all along.”

“Oh, what sort of things?”

“It told her that she was an experiment by VanHeilding to develop a next level Node Runner.”

“Holy crap. How did Luca react to that?”

“Not very well, as you can imagine. But I think it answered a lot of questions she had about herself.”

“Like what?”

“Oh, she said that she often felt dislocated from the real world, and this revelation seemed to resonate with her.”

By now, Scott had detached the shuttle and slowly moved it out from the beacon. He was readying the ship for a burn to take them back to the New World. Steph tightened up her seat harness and braced herself for the burst of acceleration to come. But as she glanced back at Scott, she could see he was focused on the navigation screen. He tapped an icon to bring up the holo-display.

“I think we’ve got company.” His finger pointed to a blip on the very edge of the schematic. “Big ship, heading our way.” He glanced over at Steph. “Looks like Cyrus was right. Better buckle up. I’m going to try and outrun it, so this is going to be intense.” He hit initiate and promptly passed out.

When Scott returned to consciousness, he found Steph’s seat empty. The burn had completed and they were moving at close to top speed for this shuttle. But when he checked, he could see that the same ship he’d spotted near the beacon was not that far behind

them. He was convinced now that it was clearly the second VanHeilding ship that Cyrus had alluded to. And there was no doubt in Scott's mind that it was chasing them down.

At their current speed, they would be back at New World One in less than eighteen hours. He unfastened his harness, floated out of the seat, and pulled himself through the companionway that led down into the main cabin of the shuttle. Steph was tending to a hydration pack attached to Luca's right arm. It was like an old-school IV line except designed with a pressure pump for zero-g. She glanced up at Scott as he entered.

"How is she?" Scott asked as he floated in beside her.

"She's okay, still the same. I was just making sure the hydration line didn't get screwed up during that burn. You weren't joking about that kick. Did we lose that ship?"

"No, it's right behind us, definitely chasing us down. The only problem now is that we'll be coming in hot into the New World, bringing trouble with us. I need to get a message out to Cyrus and Miranda and let them know."

Steph simply nodded in reply.

He cast his gaze at Luca. Her face had regained some of its color; gone was the pallid complexion of earlier. Maybe there was a real chance she would come around.

"I should have been there for her." His voice was low.

"You're here now, Scott."

"I should never have let them talk me into sending her to Earth all those years ago."

"Maybe, but would you forgive yourself if something bad happened?"

Scott gave a slight nod. "No, I suppose not."

"Then don't beat yourself up over it. It is what it is. She's here now, and she needs you...and Miranda."

A brief moment passed, and Scott contemplated this. "Yeah, I suppose you're right." He bucked up a bit. "Anyway, I'd better go get that message sent."

He floated back to the flight deck, strapped himself in, and began to send a message over X-band.

"Miranda, Cyrus, this is Scott here. You'll be glad to hear I've located Luca and Steph, both are on board now and we're on our way back to the New World. However, Luca seems to be in some sort of catatonic state. According to Steph, she used a neural lace to

interface with the beacon's network and ended up coming face-to-face with some of VanHeilding's Node Runners.

“However, we’ve got a bigger problem on our hands. You were right about that second ship, Cyrus, and it showed up at the beacon just as we were leaving. We now have it on our tail. I’m going to delay our retro-burn to the very last second to put some extra space between us and that ship. I hope you've got those defenses up and running, because we’re going to need them.”

BATTLE DROID

The ship chasing them down was still a few hours behind, But Scott was taking a big risk delaying the retro-burn until the last second. He wanted to arrive at the New World well ahead of the pursuers. But the longer he delayed the burn, the higher the thrust required to slow them down, and that meant heavy gee, which meant that he and Steph would probably black out.

Any time they would gain might well be nullified by how long it took them to regain consciousness after the burn. The doctor could handle it better than Scott—she always could—but she could not pilot the ship. Then there was the effect on Luca. That sort of physical strain could not be good for her. So in the end, he decided to take it slow and steady and hope that Cyrus had enough firepower to fend off the VanHeilding ship. He reckoned since they wanted Luca alive, they would not simply blow them to pieces. Nevertheless, he would need to get his timing right, and stay alert.

For the first hour of the retro-burn, he and Steph could do nothing except watch the main navigation monitor as the VanHeilding craft slowly gained on them. By the second hour, they began to get a visual image of it on the main monitor, albeit at maximum zoom. But by the end of the third hour, the ship was virtually snapping at their heels.

The retro-burn ended as suddenly as it had begun, and Scott could feel his body being released from the punishing gee-forces it had been subjected to, yet it took him a few moments to recover enough to even speak. “I’m getting too old for this shit.”

“You and me both.”

“You always seemed to be better able to handle this than anyone I know, Steph.”

“Did I ever tell you? I hate space.”

“Many times, Steph. Many times,” he said as he hit the comms icon to contact Cyrus. But before he could establish a connection, Steph slapped him on the upper arm to get his attention and pointed at the main monitor.

“Look, Scott. Look! They’re firing missiles at us.”

Scott zoomed in on the display. Two stubby metallic objects were accelerating away from the underbelly of the VanHeilding ship. “They’re not missiles, Steph. They’re battle droids.”

“Is that good or bad?”

“They’re not trying to blow us to bits, so that’s good. They’re trying to take control of this shuttle, and if they do, then that’s bad.” Scott hit the comms icon again and finally raised Cyrus.

“Scott, we have your ship on screen. And you’ve got two objects closing in on you fast. They look like droids of some kind.”

“Please tell me those defenses are up and running, Cyrus.”

“One of the weapons turrets is operational and could theoretically hit those droids.”

“Theoretically?”

“They’re not fully calibrated. Meaning that the plasma blast might not go where we want, and your ship is in the way of a clear shot.”

“Okay, understood. I’ll make some space for you, then you hit those bastards as hard as you can.”

“You got it.”

“I’m going to adjust our vector thirty degrees down from our current trajectory. When you see that happen, you’ll have a window of opportunity, but only for a few seconds before they readjust their flight path.”

“We’re ready when you are.”

“Okay. Wait for my mark.”

Scott slowly reoriented the craft so it was again facing the direction of travel. Through the cockpit window, he could see the massive cylindrical habitat of New World One come into view, still some distance away. Then he dialed in the new vector. “Okay, Cyrus. Here we go.”

He hit initiate and suddenly felt his body being hauled upward from his seat; only the harness held him in place. As the craft dropped, he caught sight of two plasma blasts emanating from the New World, followed by two more in quick succession. They whipped past the shuttle at impressive speed, one coming perilously close, momentarily causing the cockpit controls to flicker as it passed.

“Holy crap, that was close.” Steph glanced around the cockpit as the electronics settled down and stopped flickering.

Scott's attention was now on the rear monitor as he tracked the path of the four incandescent balls of plasma.

Two were well wide of the mark and sailed past the targets out into deep space. But the third was a direct hit. The droid flared briefly as it suffered catastrophic systems failure. It tumbled off in a spiral. But the fourth plasma bolt only grazed its target. For a moment, Scott and Steph held their breath, waiting to see if it had been close enough to effect enough damage on the droid. It didn't, and the machine kept on coming.

"Crap, they only hit one. They need to fire again!" Steph almost shouted at Scott.

"We don't have time—it's too close." He tried to shift the craft's vector again, but it was too slow to react.

Thump!

"Scott, Scott, it's on the hull!"

"I know, I know."

"What do we do?" Steph stared up at the cockpit roof with wide-eyed fear.

Scott's first thought was to do a high-acceleration burn and try to shake off the droid that way. But it would take them way out of range of the New World weapons system, where they would be easy prey for another salvo of battle droids.

"Scott?" The comms crackled into life.

"Cyrus. One down. But the other just attached itself to the hull."

"I see it. Listen, I've got a crazy idea. If you can get the craft closer, we can shoot you with a low-intensity blast."

"That's crazy, Cyrus. It will completely disable the ship, including life support."

"Yeah, I know. But you should have enough volume of air inside to last you for a while. We can get a ship out to you in twenty minutes."

"I don't know, Cyrus. From what little I remember about low-intensity plasma blasts, you could still blow a hole in our hull. That's game over."

"Got any EVA suits?"

"Just two, and they could also suffer electronic damage from the blast."

"I said it was a crazy idea, but it's all I got."

"Appreciate it, Cyrus. But let me try something else first."

"What?"

“No time to explain, that droid is on the move. Gotta go.”

Scott killed the comms and unfastened his seat harness. “Steph, I’m going outside to see if I can get rid of that droid.”

“What? Are you nuts? That thing is probably armed to the teeth. You’ll get yourself killed.”

By now, Scott had floated out of the cockpit and down to the suit locker. “You heard what Cyrus was planning. It could kill us all.”

Steph, who had followed Scott down into the main cabin, now grabbed his arm. “You don’t have to do this.”

Scott paused for a moment. “I’m sorry Steph...for getting you into all this shit. You don’t deserve it.”

“Yeah, well, it is what it is, and you know me well enough to know I’m not one to back out when the going gets tough. But what you’re doing is crazy—taking on a battle droid?”

Scott started getting suited up. “Any minute now, this ship will be under VanHeilding control. That means we’re all screwed.”

Scott clipped his helmet on and shoved a plasma pistol into a side cargo pocket. He gave Steph a wry smile and stepped into the airlock. “Just like old times, eh?” The inner door closed before Steph could answer.

Scott attached the tether just as the outer door opened, presenting the vastness of space before him. It was a moment that never failed to invoke a sense of awe, and probably the very reason he had hitched his future to a life amongst the stars. Perhaps it was the romantic in him, yet romantics seldom have a good end. More often than not they end in tragedy. Yet, he only had one thought in his mind—bring Luca back to safety and maybe have a chance to make up for all these lost years, assuming he made it out of this alive. He opened a comms channel to Steph.

“Where’s the droid now?”

“Top side, back near the starboard engine bay, around ten meters from the airlock.”

“Okay, keep me posted if and when it moves.”

Scott took out his weapon and slowly raised his head out of the airlock. He could see the machine, just where Steph said it would be. A quadruped, with a gait that was a cross between a big cat for speed, and an ape for dexterity. Yet it was moving uncharacteristically slow. Then he realized that it needed to use the

handholds just like a human would, otherwise it would float away from the hull and have to use its thrusters to get back. It was currently working its way to the rear of the craft, where all the main ship systems were housed.

Scott gently raised his weapon, got the target firmly in its sights, and fired. An incandescent blue ball of electrical rage hit the droid on its left flank and it seemed to lose its grip on the ship's hull. But as Scott moved fully out of the airlock, he could see that the droid was still clinging on, and still functioning. He had only inflicted minor damage on it. For a brief second, he checked the weapon, looking for some reason as to why it hadn't blown a hole in the droid. Yet there was nothing wrong with it; the machine was simply made of stronger stuff than he had reckoned.

By now, he was fully in view of the droid that had quickly reoriented itself to seek out the source of the attack. Scott, realizing that he had left himself exposed, frantically tried to gain cover back inside the airlock. But he was not fast enough, and the droid returned fire.

The blast fell short, hitting the hull just in front of him. But Scott lost his grip on the handhold as he twisted to avoid the impact, and now he found himself tumbling in free space, with nothing but the tether connecting him to the ship. Another blast whipped past him.

He fired back, but it was wild and random, only aiming in the general direction of the droid. This also spun him around more and more as the kickback added to his erratic momentum—which was probably the only thing that prevented the droid from scoring a direct hit on him.

Scott needed to do something, and fast. He fired a blast above his head, which propelled him downward until the tether jerked at its full extension. He then spun around the underside of the shuttle, slamming into the hull and began frantically grabbing at anything that even approximated a hand hold, finally gaining purchase on a sensor array.

“Scott?”

“A little busy right now, Steph.”

“So I see. The droid's on the move, heading around to you. You'd better get outta there.”

“Which way's it coming?”

“Directly behind you.”

“Okay, keep me posted on what it's doing.”

“You got it.”

Scott scrambled forward only to be halted by a tug on the fully extended tether. “Shit.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Tether. I need to lose it.”

“You’d better hurry.”

Scott unclipped the tether and began to work his way forward across the shuttle’s undercarriage. *This was not the way it was supposed to go*, he thought. Not only did he have an ineffective weapon, he was now on the run from this thing, and in peril of losing a hand hold and floating off into space.

“Steph?”

“Still here.”

“I have an idea. Do you know how to initiate a burn?”

“Damnit Scott, I’m a doctor, not a pilot.”

“Get on with Cyrus—it’s his ship, he’ll talk you through it. Tell him I need a five-second, low-thrust burn—and hurry.”

For the next minute or so, Scott played hide and seek with the droid. It was not as agile as him, so he could keep one step ahead of it. But what it lacked in agility it made up for in its sheer determination to kill him, and he had a few near misses. He wouldn’t be able to keep this up indefinitely.

“Scott, I think I have it figured out.”

“Good. Now listen carefully. I’m going to lure this droid out to the rear of the shuttle and around the starboard engine exhaust port. When I give you the signal, you initiate the burn. I’m hoping it will be enough to vaporize this thing.”

There was a momentary pause.

“Steph, did you get that?”

“Yeah, but you can’t be out there, Scott. You’ll get thrown off the hull, you’ll never be able to hang on. That much I do know.”

“Don’t worry about me, I’ll reconnect to the tether, that will keep me from floating away.”

“But that might not take the strain. It’ll snap.”

“Well, that’s a risk I’m willing to take, Steph. So just wait for my signal.”

“But this is crazy, Scott.”

“Of course it is. Just be ready.”

Scott planned the course he would take in his mind. He needed the droid in the direct line of fire when the engines ignited, and for him to be hooked back onto the tether. But no matter which way he worked it in his mind, there would be a moment when he could be wide open for a kill shot. But he had no other choice.

He slowly clambered his way along the underside of the shuttle and had just reached the engine bay when the droid finally came into view behind him. It unleashed a blast that flew past his feet as he pulled himself up into the starboard exhaust cowlings. He hung there for a moment, waiting for the droid to come out from the underside of the ship, but it was a no-show.

“Steph, can you see where the droid is?”

“It’s on the undercarriage, down near the starboard engine bay.”

“Is it moving?”

“Nope, just squatting there. No, wait... I think it’s doing something to the hull. It looks like it’s opening some panel or other.”

“Crap. I think it’s given up chasing me and going back to plan A.”

“So what now?”

“I need to get it angry.” Scott leaned around the edge of the cowlings and took aim at the droid. He fired off three shots, two of which hit, to little effect other than to get its attention. He ducked back just in time as the droid returned fire, but still it didn’t follow.

Scott leaned out again and discharged the entire weapon at the droid. This time it had the desired effect: it got angry and unleashed a barrage of return fire. Scott, in the meantime, had clambered out of the way.

“It’s moving, Scott.”

“Okay, get ready to initiate that burn.” He moved fast over the face of the exhaust cowlings around to the topside of the ship. He could see the tether floating out from the airlock. He would either have to make it all the way to the airlock or take a leap of faith and launch himself off the hull and try and grab the floating tether before he went tumbling out into space.

He glanced behind him to see one of the droid’s forelimbs coming over the rim of the cowlings.

Screw it—it’s now or never, he thought, and launched himself at the tail end of the tether. He frantically grabbed at it, but it bounced off his hand. He tried again with the other with no better

luck. On the third try, he finally managed to snag it and started pulling it in to get to the clip end. Below him, the droid was directly over the engine exhaust but maneuvering itself to take aim. He felt the end clip onto the tether and snapped it onto his EVA suit.

“Hit it, Steph. Do it now, NOW!”

The engines ignited, and he was slammed back down against the hull as the shuttle accelerated. A plasma blast whizzed past his head. He craned his neck against the forces trying to rip him from the ship and looked back at the starboard engine. Both of the droid’s forelimbs were fanatically scrambling at the edge of the cowling, trying to gain purchase while the rest of the machine was engulfed in a fiery plasma plume extending some several meters. He saw it finally lose its battle and succumb to the white-hot maelstrom—an incandescent ball tumbling backward out into space.

At the same time, Scott felt like his limbs were about to be torn from his body, such were the forces he was being subjected to.

“Kill it, Steph...kill it.”

The burn ceased as quickly as it started, and the acceleration eased. Slowly, with much pain and effort, Scott clawed his way back to the airlock and closed the outer door.



* * *

When Scott’s shuttle finally docked at New World One, he was understandably relieved to have made it back with all on board still in one piece. However, now that the Perception had also arrived, it would be the first time in years that he would meet Miranda face to face.

It was a prospect that he was both excited for and dreading in equal measure. They had grown apart over many years—not because his feelings were any less, but that Miranda reminded him

of the trauma of Luca's exile. And perhaps, if he was being truthful with himself, a small part of him blamed Miranda for that. But it was not her fault either, and he knew she felt exactly the same loss—she had a different way of dealing with it. All these feelings came flooding back as the shuttle came into dock.

It also didn't help that she would look almost exactly the same as he remembered her twenty years ago, by virtue of her enhanced DNA. She would still look thirty, while he, being a mere mortal, felt every one of the fifty years now resting on his shoulders.

Yet they had been in constant contact over the last few weeks, not direct conversations as such, because the vast distances of space provided no such luxuries. But still, they had exchanged more words the last three weeks than they had in the last ten years. Yet they were curt, short, professional. More like updates on progress than inquiries about each other's personal well-being. But even so, there was no escaping the subtext in their stilted dialogue—they both needed each other, and they both knew it.

When they did finally meet, their moment was overtaken by both Miranda's joy at having found Luca, followed by deep concern over her current physical state. As they made their way to the med-bay, Scott was overcome with a deep desire to wrap Miranda up in his arms and tell her everything would be alright. He resisted; now was not the time. But maybe there would be another.

AWAKENING

Somewhere in the back of Luca's mind, she was aware of the need to return to the physical world. The ship would be free of the beacon by now, but it would still need her input to pilot it to New World One. Part of her had sensed the presence of another VanHeilding ship in close proximity, so they were not out of the woods yet. She had gotten a hint of it from the mind of the Node Runner. But how far away it was, she was not sure. Nevertheless, it was best for her to return and get the ship moving again.

She expected to return to the familiar landscape of the ship's flight deck. But as she probed, she realized that she had lost the interface connection—Fly was gone, or offline, or worse. A sting of panic pierced her mind as she began to decipher the physical stimuli now entering her consciousness. Her body felt like stone, her limbs like leaden weights struggling to respond to her desire to move. Bright light flooded into her optic nerves as she began to open her eyes—just a little at first, until she regained some control over her limbs and raised a hand to shield them from the glare. *Where the hell am I?* she thought.

Her vision slowly adjusted, bringing details of her surroundings into focus. She expected to see the cockpit of the ship, but instead she was looking at...a ceiling. Bright, white, clean, almost sterile in its appearance. She was lying flat on her back looking up, and she was somewhere with full gravity—that's why she found it so hard to move. It was definitely not inside the relay beacon, since that had no artificial gravity.

Have I been captured? Is this a VanHeilding ship? These thoughts flickered through her mind as she tried to compute the parameters of her current location. Panic began to fuel her body and she summoned the effort to turn sideways, raising herself up on one elbow. She was not tied down, not trapped, free to move. This was a good sign.

Luca scanned the room, and judging by the other beds, all of which were empty, and the equipment that was arrayed around the

room, it was a med-bay. But where? And how did she get here, considering that only a few short moments ago she was sitting in the pilot seat on board the banged-up orbit hopper and interfaced with the Grid.

Something tugged at her arm. An IV line snaked into a vein just above her wrist. Luca's gut reaction was to rip it out, but she halted and instead followed the transparent plastic tubing all the way up to a pouch suspended from a hook containing a clear liquid, labeled *NaCl 0.9%*. She knew enough to know that this was a *saline solution*, common for a patient suffering from dehydration. In other words—harmless.

Her eyes returned to where the IV entered her body just above the wrist and began to peel off the plaster covering the cannula. Then she gently pulled out the long, thin plastic needle. Blood began to pool at the insertion point, and she held a finger over it to stanch the flow. At the very same moment, the door opened and in walked Dr. Stephanie Rayman. "Luca, you're awake."

Luca took a second to respond. "Steph?" her voice was faint, her throat parched. She took the finger off her wrist and began to rub her neck.

"It's okay, take it easy, Luca. You shouldn't take that out, you're still dehydrated. Here, drink this." Steph handed her a beaker of water. Luca sipped, the clear cold liquid soothing her fragile throat, so she drank and drank until it was empty, then held out the beaker for Steph to refill it.

"We thought you would never wake up. You've been out for days."

Luca felt her throat loosen. "What happened? Where am I?"

"We're in the New World. We arrived around fourteen hours ago. You were catatonic, as well as malnourished and dehydrated. I got some fluids and nutrients into you and...well, it seems to have done the trick."

"But how? I was just—"

"Better rest. We can explain later."

Luca resigned herself to Steph's medical advice, primarily because her throat still felt like sand, and she began to gulp down another beaker of water. She was halfway into it when the door opened again. This time, Scott and Miranda entered.

"Luca!" Her mother was the first to rush over. "You're awake."

Luca nodded. "Yeah."

Miranda wrapped her up in her arms. "I'm so glad you're awake." She squeezed her tight for a moment before releasing her, sitting back on the bed as she did. "I'm sorry...for all the crap we put you through. It was stupid, reckless...shouldn't have made you leave Earth." She glanced up at Scott as if to seek confirmation.

"You had us worried," was the most he could add.

Luca began to feel those large gaps she had always had in her emotional fabric finally fill up and close over. Here they all were, after all these years and all that she had been through, together again at last. Yet another part of her felt a little anticlimactic, and what she had sought at the outset of her journey was now replaced with a new set of emotional gaps. Not least, how she got here. "Can someone please tell me what the hell is going on?"

"Your ship was dead in the water, floating free near Beacon 23. Scott took a shuttle and rescued you." Miranda put her hand on Scott's arm.

"Dead in the water?" Luca searched her mind for any memory of this, but there was none.

"Yes, you were out for the count, and Steph couldn't pilot the ship."

Luca was sitting up now and looked from one to the other. "I was interfaced with the Grid...just now...a few moments ago. How can I be here?"

Since no one had a good answer to this, they all stood in silence for a beat. Then Luca reached up to the back of her skull and touched the neural lace; it was still active and fully meshed around her cranium. "Fly—where's Fly? I can't sense it."

"The drone?" Miranda again looked up at Scott.

"Yes, the one Athena gave me. Where is it?"

"It's here." Steph picked up Luca's backpack, reached in, and pulled out the drone. "It's deactivated. That's why you can't sense it."

Luca gave a long sigh. "Sorry, I'm just a little...confused at the moment, still trying to process it all."

"That's okay, Luca." Miranda leaned in and placed a hand on Luca's shoulder. "Just rest, you're safe now."

Luca shook her head. "We're not safe here, they're coming. Droids, hundreds of them."

Scott, Miranda, and Steph all exchanged glances. The type reserved for when discussing crazy people.

“I’ve seen them, row upon row, ready to be deployed.”

“How do you know this?” said Scott, a look of concern developing across his features.

“The neural lace Athena gave me.” She touched the back of her head again—a little troubled by the fact that the lace had not deactivated. “I used it to interface with Fly, the drone. And through that to connect to the ship’s systems and control the craft until we docked with the beacon. That’s when we were hacked...by Node Runners. They disabled the release mechanism so we couldn’t leave. So I just followed the data-stream all the way to the source.”

Luca paused to look up at them. “I read his mind, the Runner. He was afraid...afraid of what I might do to him—I think.” Luca’s eyes widened, and she shook her head a little. “I probed his mind. There were images of a drone army in the cargo hold of a big ship, or maybe more than one ship, I’m not sure. There were other things too, things I could not understand. But he was in such fear of me that I withdrew back along the data-stream. Last thing I remember was sending you a message with the images and undocking the ship, then...I woke up here.” She gave a gesture at the room.

This was met with silence, and Luca suspected that they were all, in their own individual ways, considering her sanity.

“Don’t you see? It’s an invading army, and the New World is the target. They are coming. VanHeilding and the other Earth families are coming to take control.”

“They’re already here, Luca,” Scott said matter-of-factly.

She sat bolt upright, her body already regaining some sense of balance in the natural environment of full gravity. “Here, now?”

“Two ships of the Seven, parked way out from the habitat. Out of range of our plasma cannons—waiting. The largest of the two was responsible for the destruction of QI, Homer on Ceres. The second, smaller ship chased us back from the relay beacon. It deployed two battle drones that attacked us en route. But we...dealt with them and got here in one piece.” Scott gave a dismissive gesture as if to imply it had all been just a minor inconvenience.

“Are you sure about what you saw?” Miranda leaned in a little, her voice low and maternal. “Could it have been just...a dream?”

Anger welled up inside Luca. How could her mother say this to her, after all she had already hidden from her? “You know it’s not a dream or some figment of my imagination. You knew all along I had been engineered from birth to be some sort of monster

designed to navigate the data-stream, like a biological QI—but you never thought to tell me.”

For the third time in as many minutes, there was silence in the room before Miranda finally answered. Her voice was low and maternal. “It wasn’t like that, Luca. At the start, we didn’t even know. Only after the kidnapping attempts were made did we start to wonder why. It broke our hearts to send you away to live on Earth. But we just wanted you to be safe.”

“You mean to be a lab rat? To be studied by Athena, and Dr. Rayman, and her institute?”

“I’m sorry,” Miranda said, with a hint of resignation in her voice. “I know we should have told you, but...there never seemed to be a right time. We just wanted to protect you.”

Luca lay back against the headboard and let out a long sigh. She looked at the concern on her parents’ faces and slowly began to realize that she was no longer angry any more. It all seemed vaguely distant and unimportant. “It’s okay, really. I get it. Why put me through it.”

“Yes, yes, exactly.” Scott seized his moment to contribute.

“It may seem strange, but I’m alright with it. For the first time in my life, it all makes sense.” Luca looked up, astonished to see a tear rolling down her mother’s cheek, even her father’s outer shell seemed to be cracking. He held his hand up to his temple, his head lowered. Then Luca realized that he was receiving a message from someone. He glanced back at her, a little embarrassed to find her looking at him with what she could only assume he interpreted as a disapproving look.

“What is it?” Miranda had noticed the concern on Scott’s face.

“They’ve just issued an ultimatum. Hand over control of New World One, or they’ll take it by force.”

DECISION TIME

Under Dr. Rayman's insistence, they decamped to an anteroom with a long observation window used by medical staff to keep an eye on patients. Luca needed to recuperate, and Scott and Miranda talking incessantly to her was not going to help. So in true doctor style, Steph kicked them all out so Luca could get some rest.

Cyrus found time to join them after the news of the ultimatum had been issued, seemingly to reassure them that it was all just a bluff.

"We should get out now, before it all goes to rat-shit." Steph sat back in a soft low seat. She looked drained; the journey here had taken a toll on her, and what she really needed was some rest.

"No. They're bluffing. There's no way they can get past our defenses. We've got two long-range plasma cannon turrets fully operational. A single blast would be enough to stop either of those VanHeilding ships dead in their tracks. We could turn them into a dust cloud if we wanted to." Cyrus seemed genuinely proud of the New World's weapons capability and delivered his reply with wild, enthusiastic gesticulations.

"What about this *vision* of Luca's?" Miranda directed her question to Cyrus.

"You mean the droids in the image files?"

"Yeah. What if it's real? That would change the equation."

"I don't see how it changes anything." Cyrus was still convinced of the New World's weapons system. "We destroyed the droid that was chasing you down from the relay beacon. Even if they have more of them, they're still no match for a plasma cannon."

"But Luca's talking hundreds." Scott, having had first-hand experience fighting one of these droids, did not share Cyrus's confidence. "Could we really defend against that?"

"We don't really know what she saw, or what she thought she saw. It could be anything, or nothing. You can't make a decision based on *visions*." Miranda did air quotes with her fingers. "Think about it, she's been catatonic for several days. Who knows what

dreams she's been having? It's not reality."

"I know what I saw, and it's real," said a strange voice from out of nowhere.

"What the..." Scott looked around for the source, as did the others.

"We're not safe here. We need to get out," the voice continued.

Scott finally located the source. The drone, Fly, was resting on the edge of a countertop just inside the door. He never noticed it coming in, and presumably none of the others did either. "Luca?"

"Yes."

He stood up and looked through the observation window back into the ward. Luca was sitting up in bed, arms folded over her chest, a deep scowl on her face.

"Eh, did you hear all that?" Miranda joined Scott at the window.

"I did." Fly lifted off the counter, flew a little closer to the group, and landed back down again.

"Luca"—Steph stood up and peered out through the window—"you need to get some rest."

Luca just scowled back.

"Are you...controlling that thing?" Miranda turned around and directed her question toward Fly.

"Yes, it's proved very useful. We wouldn't have got here without it."

"Holy crap." Cyrus moved over and started to examine the drone. "This is a very elegant bit of engineering. Very cool." He turned his attention to Scott and tapped his temple. "I've been extolling the virtues of the mind-machine interface to Scott for ages. But he just doesn't get it."

"Yeah, well, maybe I like my brain too much."

Miranda raised a hand to silence everyone for a moment; her demeanor became serious. "Okay, let's say you're right, Luca, and there's a ship, or maybe two ships full of these battle droids. How long would they take to reach here, Cyrus?"

"Eh, well, they wouldn't. We'd just blow them to bits before they got anywhere near us."

"Assume that some could get through. What's the travel time?" Miranda persisted.

"Fifteen minutes, give or take." He wobbled his hand to emphasize his approximation.

"And how long for us to get to the shuttle dock?"

Scott suddenly saw where Miranda was going with this. “At least thirty minutes.”

“Anyone else see a problem here?”

Scott nodded. “If we have to get out in a hurry, it could mean fighting our way off this tub.”

“But there would need to be swarms of droids to get some past the defenses.” Cyrus was not giving up just yet.

“There are. I’m sure of it,” said Fly/Luca.

Miranda turned to Cyrus. “Got any heavy weapons stashed on the New World?”

“Eh...not really. Just the usual small arms, that’s about it.”

Miranda unclipped her plasma pistol and held it up. “So you’re saying this is all we have to fight our way off?”

“Hey, New World One represents the pinnacle of human civilization.” Cyrus gesticulated wildly. “Look around you, it’s a goddamn utopia—we don’t need guns here.”

“Well, that’s just great! So now that we’re in paradise, we’re reduced to throwing rocks at our enemies?” Miranda said, a little cynically.

“We don’t have any of those, either.”

“Will you two just cut it out.” Steph stood up, looking from one to the other. “I didn’t sign up for this crap. All I was supposed to do was to see that Luca got to Johnston, not go on a wild death-race across half the solar system.”

“I’m sorry, Steph. Sorry you got dragged into this mess,” Miranda replied apologetically.

“Yeah, well. The bottom line is what are we going to do now? Stay and hope for the best, or run away.”

“Run away,” said Fly/Luca.

“We’ve still got seven hours to decide,” Cyrus reminded them.

“Even so, if we were to *run away*, then where to? Where do we go?” Scott sat down again.

“Somewhere there’s a QI,” said Miranda. “That’s the only thing that can give us some protection.”

“Yeah, but for how long?” said Scott. “If they can destroy the QI, Homer on Ceres, who’s to say they can’t do the same to any of the others?”

“Well, I want to get back to Earth,” said Steph. “I hate space.”

“Mars is on the far side of the sun. It would take months to get there,” said Miranda. “Which leaves Europa, and the QI, Solomon.

That's the closest to us, but they're so weird there, they give me the heebie-jeebies. I suggest we get to the Perception and then we can decide where best to go."

"Well, I'm going back to Earth, one way or the other," said Steph. "So, if it's okay with you guys, I'll be on the next transport heading that way."

Scott nodded his acceptance of Steph's desire to get back home. She had already gone beyond anything he or Miranda had asked of her. "I don't know how we can ever repay you for this, Steph."

"Well, you owe me one. Someday, I'll need something—that's when you can repay me."

"Of course, Steph. Anything," said Miranda.

"So we're getting out of here?" Fly buzzed its wings to get their attention.

"Luca, I'm not talking to you through that thing."

Fly buzzed its wings again. "We're not safe here. We need to go."

Miranda stood up and nodded. "Okay, decision time. Who's coming, who's staying. Cyrus, Steph?"

Cyrus shook his head. "No way I'm leaving. We're perfectly safe here. Nothing is going to get through."

"Seriously, Cyrus, if what Luca is saying is true, then there's every possibility that the New World will be taken over by VanHeilding and his sponsors. And what do you think is going to happen to you when he realizes who you are, Cyrus Sanato, Chief Engineer of the Hermes, one of the people responsible for enabling the dominion of the QIs?"

Cyrus looked down at his feet and pursed his lips. "Everything I have is here. Everything I've built is contained within this vast cylinder. I'm not leaving it. I'll take my chances here."

"Steph?"

"I need to return to Earth. I need to get back home."

Scott looked over at Cyrus. "There must be a ship heading for Earth, something with room for Steph?"

But the engineer was distracted. He had one hand on his right temple and seemed to be concentrating.

"Cyrus, what is it?"

The others detected Scott's concern and looked over at Cyrus, waiting for him to respond.

"Cyrus?"

He held a hand out to signal to them to be quiet for a moment as he focused. Scott, Miranda, and Steph all exchanged concerned glances. Even Fly/Luca twitched and buzzed its wings.

“Everything okay?” Scott said this more in hope than as a request for information.

Cyrus slowly turned his head toward him and the color drained from his face. “No—far from it. Everything just got real.”

“What do you mean? What’s going on?”

But Cyrus didn’t answer. Instead, he rushed across the med-lab to a bank of monitors that occupied most of one wall, the others following after him.

“Cyrus.” Scott grabbed the engineer’s arm to get his attention. “What the hell is going on?”

“It’s started.”

“What has?”

“Luca’s right—look.” The large central monitor blossomed into life and displayed a view of space, black and empty. The image zoomed and zoomed again to pick out the brooding form of the main VanHeilding ship. Cyrus tapped at a control interface, and the image focused. Then they could see it: a mass of autonomous battle droids spewing out from the belly of the ship.

“Oh shit.”

The image on the screen flipped to black empty space again, and then began zooming in on the second VanHeilding ship. It was the same—a mass of droids being ejected into space.

Miranda grabbed Scott’s arm. “We gotta go, we can’t stay here.”

“Yeah, okay. Let’s start making our way to the shuttle.”

“I told you so.” Fly swooped down onto one edge of the main monitor.

“And I told you, I’m not talking to you through that thing, Luca.”

“Well, I’m stuck in this bed, under doctor’s orders and tied down with tubes and wires.”

Miranda screwed her mouth up. “Steph, what do you want to do?”

She glanced at Scott, and then her focus was drawn back to the monitor. On screen they could see the New World defense systems had started firing. Brief, sporadic trails of incandescent blue plasma raced across the space between, intercepting the droids, picking them off one at a time.

Cyrus punched the air. "Die, you bastards, die." His joy sent a ripple of elation through Scott's spine. But it was short-lived. As they watched, it became clear that the rate of fire was having little overall impact on the numbers heading their way.

"Can't it fire any faster?" Miranda asked.

"Have you got any idea how much energy it takes to create a blast of that magnitude?"

"So you're saying no."

For a moment, Cyrus didn't respond, but then he began to slowly shake his head. "Nobody thought we would need close-range weapons. This was designed as a deterrent to ships, not hordes of droids." He gestured at the screen and then visibly slumped down in a seat. "It's no good, there's just too many." He took his gaze away from the drama unfolding on the monitor and looked at Scott, Miranda, and Steph. "We're screwed."

OPERATION DROID

Scott had to hand it to VanHeilding and the other six Earth families who were funding this operation. It was a master stroke. By taking out the QI on Ceres, they now had free reign throughout this sector of the asteroid belt. But more than that, once the Seven had secured the Belt's primary resources, they would be able to exert considerable leverage over both Earth and Mars. The era of the QIs was ending, and a new order was beginning: messier, more violent, more human.

Now, with the aid of a few hundred semi-autonomous battle droids, there was nothing anyone could do to stop them taking over New World One. Even though the newly installed defense systems were busy trying to pick off as many of the incoming machines as possible, it was like trying to swat a swarm of killer bees by throwing a box of crayons at them. They might get a few, but ultimately nowhere near enough to make a difference—the two exterior plasma cannon arrays simply didn't have the fire rate.

And even though some of the citizens were prepared to stand and fight, they possessed no military training and few effective weapons to combat such a formidable mechanized foe. This fatal flaw in defense planning was simply because no one had ever imagined such weapons or personnel would be needed. Over two decades of peace and stability will do that to a society—it was just not seen as a priority.

The only force with any bite to take on these droids were Miranda's cohort of mercenaries. They had the training and the weapons. But there were only nine of them in total, and only three of them were here on the New World with Miranda. And they knew a losing battle when they saw it. There was no way they could win this one; it would be suicide. It was time to get out—and get out now, before it was too late. Miranda sent them ahead to get the shuttle ready while she and Steph got Luca up and moving. Scott, for his part, tried to persuade Cyrus to come with them.

"So you're leaving?" Cyrus said, not with any hint of

disappointment, more as a statement of fact.

“What choice do we have, Cyrus? Soon this place will be under the control of the Seven, and there’s nothing anyone can do to stop that now. What do you think will happen to us, and especially Luca, if we stay?”

“I understand, Scott. You need to get out. But I’m staying.”

“Cyrus, if you stay, you run the risk of VanHeilding finding out who you really are. And he’s not going to forget those people responsible for his downfall all those years ago.”

“I know, but everything I have, everything I’ve built in the last two decades, is here. If I leave, I lose it all.”

“You could lose your life, Cyrus.”

“It’s a risk I’m willing to take, Scott. Weirdly, staying here is my way of fighting back.”

“Cyrus, I hate leaving you here.”

“I’ll be fine. It’s a vast habitat, and I know every inch of it. Plenty of places to hide if things get sketchy.”

“Okay, but...”

“No buts, just go. You’ve got a brief window of opportunity. Once those droids get here, their first priority will be to find a way to reconnect the New World systems with the Grid. As soon as that happens, the Node Runners will have complete control—shuttle exit from the dock will probably be disabled.”

“Anything you can do to override them?”

“I doubt it. Even I can’t fight off a concerted data attack by a group of Node Runners, that’s way too weird for me.”

“Okay. Well, stay safe, old buddy. See you on the other side.”

“Yeah, it’ll be a story to tell the grandkids.”

“I’ll tell that to Luca.”



They traveled the three or so kilometers to the nearest elevator for the dock by commandeering one of the autonomous vehicles parked outside the med-lab. Luca was still very weak and operating on a cocktail of drugs that Steph had pumped into her. Even so, she insisted on interfacing with Fly, her drone. It hovered above them, providing some useful reconnaissance of the route ahead.

They exited the vehicle near the elevators as a great mass of people bunched together to get through the entrance bottleneck. There were other elevators they could use, but these were at least another two kilometers further along the rim, so they stuck with trying to get to the shuttle dock using this route.

It would take them up to an inner cylinder that housed the smaller shuttle craft in a fully pressurized, half-gee environment, so no need for EVA suits. But after that things might get trickier, as the shuttle would then have to navigate its way through a complex series of airlocks before being released out into space. Scott was getting anxious; time was passing, and they were making slow progress.

“This is crazy, we’re never going to make it.”

“We’ve got to. This is the fastest way off this habitat.” Miranda pushed her way past a knot of people who didn’t have quite the same sense of urgency about them. “Luca, what can you see up ahead?”

“People, lots of them. And they don’t seem to be moving.”

Scott glanced up at Fly, which had risen up some ten meters above them and had a clear view of all entrances. “Should we head for the other sector?”

“No way, that would slow us down even more. Just keep tight. I’ll get us through here.” Miranda unholstered her plasma weapon and with a considerable amount of pushing and shoving, and shouts of *clear the way, emergency, move it, asshole*, she barged a way through to an open elevator.

Fly swooped down and anchored itself onto Luca’s right shoulder as they piled in and the doors shut. There were an anxious few minutes as the elevator traveled the two kilometers all the way up to the dock. As they ascended, gravity began to lessen slightly. Everyone made sure they were holding onto something before the elevator came to a halt, otherwise they would be lifted off the floor by its momentum. It spat them out onto the main dock concourse, which was busy with panicked people making their way to

whatever craft would get them off the New World.

They were hurrying across this concourse to their shuttle's location when Scott's comms burst into life.

"Scott, Cyrus here. I've changed my mind, I'm coming with you."

"What, now?"

"I'm on my way to you, be there as soon as I can."

"What about all that...*everything I have is here* stuff?"

"Yeah, well it seems everything I have is leaving—bastards. After all I've done for them. None of my partners in this business want to stay here and stick it out. They're all running away and leaving me here swinging my tail."

"We're on the concourse, nearly at the ship, so you'd better get a move on. Where are you?"

"I'm close, taking an alternative route through the maintenance tunnels, a lot less traffic."

"How's the outer dock looking?"

"Multiple droids streaming in. But I get the impression they're not looking for a major fight—maybe they see killing contractors as bad for recruitment. After all, when they do take over, they're going to need these workers. The primary objective as I see it is to stop people leaving by blocking the main access routes. But there's been a new development. We've spotted several troop transports on their way. We'll soon have boots on the ground."

"They're not leaving anything to chance, are they?"

"No, and from what I'm seeing, no one's getting off this habitat without a fight, so I sincerely hope Miranda has stashed a load of weapons on that shuttle of hers."

"You know her so well, Cyrus."

"Oh crap..." The comms suddenly went dead.

"Cyrus, Cyrus?" Nothing. "Goddamnit, Cyrus?"

"What's going on?" Miranda called over to Scott as they arrived at the shuttle. The main airlock door was open with two of her crew standing guard in case anyone tried to commandeer the craft.

"We gotta wait. Cyrus has changed his mind, he's heading out with us."

"Well, where is he? We can't hang around." Miranda mounted the steps to the airlock.

"Cyrus is coming with us?" Steph grabbed Scott's arm.

"Seems he's finding out who his real friends are," said Scott as

he stood at the airlock steps and scanned the concourse for any sign of the engineer.

“Droids, three of them, coming in through the floor.” Luca was standing beside him, and had that thousand-yard stare people who are interfacing with a machine usually have. She was seeing all this through the drone’s eyes.

“Where the hell is Cyrus? I thought you said he was on his way.” Miranda poked her head out from the airlock door, but this time she was armed with a far superior weapon than her standard plasma pistol.

“He was, then the comms went dead.”

“We gotta go, Scott,” Miranda called out.

“Just give it another minute.”

“We don’t have a minute. If there are droids entering the dock, then it’s not going to take them long to disable all the exit routes.”

“Thirty seconds, then.” He tapped his comms. “Cyrus, are you there? Come on buddy, don’t do this to me.” Still no response.

He glanced up and saw Fly heading toward the shuttle. *Luca must be bringing it back, he thought.*

He turned around and called over to her. “Luca, any sign of Cyrus?”

“No, just more droids.”

Whomp!

Scott and Miranda instinctively ducked and looked around for the source of the distinctive sound of a heavy plasma weapon being discharged.

“There, look.” Miranda pointed across to a large industrial transport ship. The rear ramp was down, and at its base three people were firing on an approaching droid. This got the attention of several other machines and they began converging in on the action.

“Shit, we’ve got multiple droids heading our way. We can’t wait any longer. Get inside now, we’re going.” Miranda’s voice was charged with urgency.

Scott looked around to see three droids and what looked like an android heading in their direction. The group were around a hundred meters away. Steph grabbed Luca by the arm and pulled her gently back toward the shuttle airlock. “We’ve run out of time. Miranda’s right, we gotta go, Scott.”

They backed up, at the same time constantly scanning the area

for any sign of Cyrus, until all of them were inside the airlock. Scott took one last look, and with a deep sigh of resignation he hit the button to close the outer door.

Miranda was in the pilot seat, working the controls for the exit protocols. “Okay, let’s get the hell out of here.”

“Wait, look!” Scott pointed out the cockpit window. Cyrus was running across the concourse as fast as Scott had ever seen him move. The only problem was several droids were converging on him.

“He’s not going to make it,” said Miranda.

Scott remained silent for a beat. Miranda was right—the engineer was a goner.

The cockpit console pinged an alert to say the airlock had been activated. “What the hell? Someone’s in the airlock.”

Scott spun around to check. “Luca!”

Then they saw her, outside on the concourse moving toward Cyrus and the machines that pursued him. Fly buzzed overhead.

“What the hell is she doing? She’s going to get herself killed.”

EXODUS

Luca guided Fly high up over the concourse and took in the scene below. At least a dozen battle droids had infiltrated the area along with several androids that seemed to be central to coordinating the attack.

To her left, a battle was in progress, although it was more of a skirmish at this point. The two contractors from the transport ship, who had started firing on the battle droids, were lying in heaps on the floor. One droid was currently making its way up the rear loading ramp of the ship, directing fire into the interior as it moved. Luca could hear the screams.

To her right, another futile skirmish was taking place, with a similar outcome. Elsewhere, transports were being boarded by panicked citizens, while luckier ones were in the process of departing.

All this she established in an instant. But her main focus was on the group of machines that now surrounded Cyrus. Fly dropped lower, hovering directly above the trapped engineer. He had the look of a frightened animal, with one hand held out in front of him, while the other rested on his right temple. He was interfacing with something, Luca could sense. He was trying in his own feeble way to assess the situation and find a way out.

“Fly, is there a way to communicate with Cyrus via his interface?”

“Yes, he’s using standard comms protocols.”

“Connect me.”

“Connection established.”

“Cyrus, this is Luca. When I give you the word, you drop to the floor, got that?”

Through Fly’s eyes, she could see his confusion at her message. He looked around trying to locate the source, but never once looked up.

“Luca? What the...”

“Trust me, drop to the floor when I say so.”

“Eh...sure, yes, yes, got it.”

Fly now swooped down behind one of the battle droids and attached itself to its neck, just below its cranial sensor array. Then it jacked in and Luca was instantly inside the machine, looking out on the concourse via the droid’s sensors.

Its visual array was impressive. She could now view the world with a multitude of spectral frequencies, all overlaid with three-dimensional object positioning data. Yet she quickly moved past this and focused on assessing its weapons and targeting systems. Within a few microseconds she had a lock on the two other droids and the android that surrounded Cyrus.

But before she could establish the trigger sequence, control was whipped away from her and she found herself being blocked by another entity that had also entered the droid’s cybernetic substrates.

Yet it hesitated when it sensed the foreign presence, drawing back slightly, confused by this enigma, like how a forest creature might regard another species on first encounter.

Luca assumed it was the android. Having sensed the droid’s detachment from the group formation, it had automatically tried to regain control. But now she realized that the android itself was under the control of a Node Runner, which meant that this android was, in reality, an avatron—a machine remotely controlled by a human. It was to the Node Runner what Fly was to her.

She could sense its bewilderment at this abnormal encounter, could sense its fear. But Luca was not deterred. She regained her focus, forced the Node Runner out of the droid’s systems, and signaled Cyrus.

“Drop. Drop now!”

Cyrus fell to the floor while Luca engaged the battle droid’s main weapons system, taking aim at the avatron. An intense ball of high-energy plasma slammed into the hapless machine. It crackled and spasmed, finally collapsing on the floor with a thump. The other droids now began working through what had just happened with their primitive AI systems, turning their attention on the rogue droid. But they were too slow to react, and all went down under a hail of plasma fire.

This did not go unnoticed by the other battle droids in the dock concourse. Their AI minds, and those of their avatron commanders, were processing what had just happened. Luca did not have much

time; they would be on her soon.

“Cyrus, run. Run.”

The engineer scrambled to his feet, jumped over the fallen avatron, and ran toward the shuttle. Luca, still using her control of the battle droid, surveyed the area, assessing the threat level. The droid’s systems, having been designed for battle, fed her vital tactical information, identifying targets, establishing attack vectors, and calculating damage probabilities. But she could also sense that it was trying to reestablish a connection to the hive mind of its Node Runner overlords, so she reprogrammed it, giving it a singular identity and a new purpose—to destroy all its brethren and their avatron controllers.

Once Luca was confident in establishing this new directive, she instructed Fly to detach. When it did, she felt a physical snap so violent that the strength to stand upright drained from her and she collapsed like a marionette with its strings cut.

She felt strong arms grab her before she hit the floor. “Luca, it’s okay. I got you.” She looked up to see Scott’s face, a patchwork of concern and fear.

With one arm around Scott’s shoulder, she hobbled back in through the shuttle airlock. Behind her, she could hear the *whomp*, *whomp* of plasma weapons discharging as the attack droid implemented its new directive.

Steph grabbed her as the inner airlock door opened and helped her into a seat. “You crazy girl, you could have got yourself killed.”

“Better get strapped in, we’re leaving,” Miranda shouted down from the flight deck.

Fly hovered above Luca, then came and landed beside her. She reached out, deactivated the little drone, and stored it in her backpack. She did all this as the New World’s launch systems began to guide the shuttle through a sequence of airlocks and elevators. After what seemed like an eternity to Luca, she finally felt weightlessness creep up on her, and then the sudden heavy-gee as the shuttle engines kicked in and launched them into space. They were free of the New World. They had escaped. She had done it.

PERCEPTION

Luca's head felt dizzy with the constant transition between different levels of gravitational forces as the shuttle powered away from New World One. She began to understand why so many people shunned space travel. Or, like Dr. Rayman, having spent so much of her life in space wanted nothing more to do with it, settling instead for the luxury of life on Earth.

Luca had spent the short journey to the Perception strapped into a seat in the main cabin, and so was not privy to the slow-building concern emanating from the flight deck. Yet she could get some sense of it from snatches of dialogue going on between Steph and Cyrus, who were also in the main cabin. The elation of their escape was slowly being eroded by concern over the lack of direct communication with Miranda's ship, Perception.

At the outset of hostilities, Miranda had instructed her main crew to leave the New World and return to the ship. Then they were to move it further out away from the possibility of direct confrontation with any of the VanHeilding ships. Not that it couldn't make a good account of itself in a direct ship-to-ship battle, but like the New World, it could not fend off a mass droid attack.

But lack of communications from either the crew or the ship's AI, Max, had Miranda troubled. Therefore, as they approached, they did so with caution, making several loops of the ship to look for any signs of a recent battle, before finally deciding whether to dock and enter. But there were no signs of a recent fight, at least not on the outside.

All this Luca gleaned from snatches of overheard conversation and general mood. Yet nothing untoward was found on the exterior of the ship, so Miranda instigated the docking procedure while Scott, Cyrus, and Steph raided the weapons locker and got ready for any surprises that might be in store for them. Suitably armed, they all piled into the airlock and waited anxiously as it cycled through the pressure equalization routine.

But when the inner door opened, they were instantly confronted

by a group of well-armed avatron troops backed up by several attack droids, all displaying the VanHeilding insignia, all directing an impressive array of weapons in their direction.

“Drop your weapons,” a voice bellowed out. “And don’t even think about resisting.”

There was a momentary stand-off as Scott and Miranda floated in front of Luca in a futile effort to afford her some protection. She could almost see the wheels in Miranda’s military mind calculating the odds, looking for some chink of conflict advantage. But there was none. They were outnumbered, out-gunned, and clearly outsmarted. Two of the armed avatrons floated forward and started relieving them of all their weapons. When it came to Luca, they unceremoniously removed her backpack where she had stored Fly.

They were all shepherded into the main elevator, gravity tugging on them as they descended down to the outer torus. Luca tried to remember the last time she was on this ship; she must have been around seven. Perhaps that’s why it felt much smaller than she remembered. Back then it had seemed vast and cavernous; now it was as if the ship had diminished, both in size and elegance. Its corridors bore the scars of decades of hard, practical living by a crew of mercenaries. Which led Luca to ask the question in her mind: *Where are the crew?* No doubt, it was a question that was also uppermost in Miranda’s mind.

As they approached the outer ring and began to feel the full centrifugal force of the rotating torus, their hands were bound behind their backs before being marched along a wide corridor. But Luca had a good idea of where they were being taken.

The Perception had originally been a luxurious interplanetary ship owned by the VanHeilding Corporation, back in the day. That was before Miranda had stolen it and first turned it into a home for her new family, then eventually transformed it into a military ship for the execution of her security business. But it still retained most of the quirks of its original design, the primary one being autonomy, and as such it had no bridge, nothing that resembled a typical flight deck. The entire vessel was operated by Max, an AI that now seemed to be distinctly absent, as all of Miranda’s clandestine attempts to communicate with it were met with silence.

The library was the closest place on the ship to a command center, so Luca reckoned that’s where they were being taken.

Strangely, she did not feel any great fear at their current predicament—being captured and bound and destined for possible death. Perhaps it was because she was still very weak from the trip from Earth, and her various encounters in the data-stream with Node Runners. But, if she was being honest with herself, she felt calm, almost content. This was in complete contrast to the rest of the crew. Luca did not need a neural interface to sense their fear, and so part of her felt a little guilty at her relaxed state and her laissez-faire attitude.

Nevertheless, her options were limited. Her backpack, with Fly, had been taken from her, but she still had the neural lace hidden under her long hair. She felt it tight against her scalp. Yet she hesitated using it right at this moment. She would wait a little longer, see where they were being brought. She sensed there was more yet to be revealed.

They entered the library, now a shoddy shadow of its former self. The original plush interior of her memory had been removed and replaced with more functional décor, as well as a raft of monitors and tech of indeterminate function.

They were instructed to take a seat along the low semicircular bench that still existed in Luca's memory, although it had lost its plush soft cushions and was now nothing more than a hard bench.

They waited. The droids took up positions on four sides, weapons trained on them. The avatron guards stood back and became still. That was when Luca saw it.

A tall, elegant avatron stood on the far side of the room with its back to them, gazing out the long window that took up most of that wall. Through this window, she could see the full length of the New World One habitat shimmering against the backdrop of the vastness of space. The avatron turned around and considered them for a moment. Then it spoke.

"Well, my dear Miranda, I see the years have been kind to you. You don't look a day older since I last saw you two decades ago."

"Fredrick." Miranda's eyes widened as she realized who was behind the robotic facade. She lunged forward with such speed, fueled by an intense anger, that she almost reached the avatron before being felled by a vicious blow to her abdomen from the butt of a heavy plasma weapon.

The speed and ferocity of her attack took VanHeilding by surprise, and his avatron jumped back a step. But in the end, it was

a futile attempt by Miranda, and she was hauled off the floor where she had collapsed and shoved unceremoniously back onto the bench. The droids twitched a little, as if they were just itching to let loose a fusillade of plasma fire.

“Where’s my crew?” Miranda said, as she spat out a gob of blood onto the nearest guard.

“Dead, mostly. I think there may be one still alive, but not for long.”

“You bastard, you didn’t have to kill them.”

“Actually, I did. To their credit, they made a good account of themselves. They managed to kill one of my guards and eliminate two battle droids before we managed to bring them to heel.”

Miranda didn’t reply; instead, she spat out another gob of blood, this time onto the floor, as the previous recipient of her ire had stepped back out of range.

VanHeilding’s robotic persona now moved in closer to the group, presumably feeling a little more confident that there would be no more futile attacks by his wayward daughter.

“And what have we here?” The avatron’s strange eyes directed their gaze to Luca. “What an enigma you’ve turned out to be. Your natural abilities as a Node Runner are truly impressive. But then again, you were designed that way.”

Luca heard all this as if in a dream; she registered what her grandfather was saying more from academic curiosity than from any desire to communicate. Yet, he droned on.

“It has been a merry dance you’ve led us on since departing Earth, and I’m so glad your family embarked on this ludicrous plan for your supposed safety. You could not imagine my joy, after all these years, my dear, when your signature popped up on the Grid. Had I not been so occupied by our adventures out here in the asteroid belt, we would have certainly been having this conversation sooner.”

The avatron gestured at the others sitting on the bench. “But this is a bonus. The entire remaining crew of the Hermes. All those responsible for instigating the age of the quantum intelligence, all gathered together again. Who would have thought? But the question now is what to do with you all. What slow, torturous death would be appropriate for the perpetrators of such a heinous crime against humanity?”

“You’re insane.”

The avatron gave a strange machine laugh at this accusation from Scott. “Ha ha...you always were a peasant, Scott McNabb. A man of limited intellect.” It turned its back on them and moved over to the window again, gesturing at the panorama outside.

Luca could see that the Perception had moved considerably closer to the New World, and so had VanHeilding’s other ships, as both could be seen in close proximity to the habitat. The avatron continued to pontificate about the greatness of the VanHeilding line, and it was beginning to bore her to no end. Instead, she zoned out and tried to contact Fly. But there was no response from the drone. No doubt they had either destroyed it or stored it somewhere that her neural lace could not penetrate. They must have known she had some way to interface with the grid, and figured out it was via the little drone. Yet why had they left her with the neural lace? Perhaps they thought it was useless without the drone.

But time was running out; she needed to do something and soon, because once Fredrick VanHeilding got bored talking about how great he was, then it would be the end for them all. She tried again to contact Fly; still no response. Yet there was something there, a background noise with a strangely familiar beat. It was more than just the incessant buzz of low-grade electrical energy that she had always been so susceptible to. This was like a mother’s heartbeat—it was the ship, the very place she had spent her early childhood. She knew its signature, knew its rhythm.

“Max?” she ventured, in her thoughts.

“Hello, Luca. So nice to see you again, after all this time.” The voice of the ship’s AI came floating through her thoughts like the ghost of a long lost, and much loved, relative. “You seem to be in a spot of bother.”

“Yes, Max. You could say that. That’s why I need your help.”

“But of course, Luca, anything for you. Although, since the passing of the QI, Homer on Ceres, I have lost all connection with the QI network. And without their knowledge and guidance, I must concede control to Fredrick VanHeilding. It is his ship, after all. Therefore, my ability to assist you may be limited.”

Luca glanced over at the avatron of her grandfather. It had not moved much since she had utilized her neural lace. *How much time has passed?* she wondered. *Seconds, microseconds? How much time do I have?*

“I understand, Max. And appreciate the mandate that you are

currently operating under; however, I'm going to give you a new directive." Luca focused on the tendrils of data now propagating throughout her cerebral cortex as she delved into the AI's mind, and with surprisingly minimal effort, she reoriented Max's protocols and gained control over the ship.

But her action did not go unnoticed. Almost immediately, Max was probed by another mind fighting to regain control. Yet, she ignored it. The mind was weak and ineffectual, and posed no real threat to her dominion over the ship's AI. What she was more concerned with now was how to commandeer one of the battle droids that stood guard in the library. But there was no data pathway for Luca to use. The machines were completely isolated from the ship's AI. She would have to go deeper into the data-stream, all the way to the source, if necessary.

ENIGMA

Luca refocused her mind and located the Node Runner attempting to retake control of the ship's AI, Max. She found its signature in the background data-stream and followed the trail all the way back to its source—the operations center on the primary VanHeilding ship. But she was immediately assailed by a blinding kaleidoscope of minds, all focused on this interloper. She recoiled as her neural pathways struggled to cope with the tsunami of data now entering her brain, all seeking to destroy her.

Luca instinctively began building defenses, creating roadblocks and barricades to counter the neural attacker. She quickly stemmed the initial onslaught and then worked to create a vantage point from which a new clarity began to manifest. Within the incoming data maelstrom, she began to identify individual vortices of data control. These she assumed were the Node Runners; she counted twenty-four in total. Yet behind them she could sense something else, a more powerful mind, a puppet master.

As her own mind began to ratchet up its processing power, finding new gears that she didn't know she possessed, a new understanding began to emerge from the data-stream, and she began to see the processing clusters at work. One group coordinated the attack on New World One, controlling the avatrons and the battle droids that were rampaging throughout the habitat. Other groups controlled the habitat's AI and the defense systems. Along with this cluster, there was another background group that was managing an exclusion zone around the New World. Nothing was getting in or out. The final, smaller cluster controlled the activities on the Perception, so she probed that group, looking for a way in. But each time she tried, she was driven off by other minds being seconded to the cluster to provide backup.

There were just too many for Luca to deal with all at once; she did not yet have the skill, nor the strength, to get past their defenses. She needed to reduce their numbers somehow, and soon. By now, VanHeilding must be aware that she was in the data-stream

—time might be moving slowly for Luca, but it was still running out.

She redirected her attention back to the cluster that controlled the New World and sought out the weakest Node Runner. It was clear to her that all were not created equal. Some were more adept at manipulating the data-stream than others. But since this takeover operation was so extensive, even the weakest of the novices were pressed into service. So, like a predator in the wild, Luca sought out the stragglers from the herd, and pounced.

The speed and ferocity of her neural probe overwhelmed a hapless Node Runner in an instant, surprising even her—she had expected more resistance, but there was none. The only response her synapses registered was one of utter shock followed by a rapid disintegration of the Node Runner's mind into static. He now existed in the data-stream as nothing more than white noise. A pang of guilt stung her as she realized that he was now almost certainly brain dead.

But she moved on, tracing his neural footprint to an avatron inside the New World that he had been controlling. From there, Luca could access a cohort of attack droids currently causing mayhem within the habitat. She gave them a new directive and set them targeting each other. The ensuing chaos sucked in the minds of other Node Runners as they fought to control the situation. Yet Luca kept moving. Targeting the next weakest mind, controlling its avatron, redirecting more droids, creating even more chaos inside the New World.

Finally she withdrew, pivoting back to the primary Node Runner network. Again she tried to penetrate the cordon around the group on the Perception, but she was thwarted. She needed a way to break through, a way to create more chaos and confusion.

She probed the Grid, this time not looking for the weakest mind, but for the most tactical asset, the one that would give her the advantage and tip the balance in her favor. She was seeking out the Node Runner who controlled the New World defenses. Now that the ships had moved closer to the habitat, she might be able to finish this once and for all.

Luca found a route through the habitat's AI. It was controlled by not one, but three Node Runners. But as she nullified one, another would simply take their place. Yet they were slow to react, and Luca found she could outrun them by creating multiple parallel

processes, chewing up their processing power, burning them out.

She finally broke through, took control of the exterior plasma cannon, and fired a volley of blasts at the main VanHeilding ship. It seemed to take an infinity for the high-energy plasma to travel through the vacuum of space and reach the target. In her mind's eye she could see the ship trying to take evasive action, and sensed the panic ripple through the Grid as the target was struck.

It was, as she had reckoned, a pivotal moment. Gone were the certainty and confidence of the Node Runners—she could feel doubt beginning to creep into their minds. They were not invincible, they were vulnerable, and she was coming for them.

In the confusion, she saw her opportunity to break through the defense wall that they had set up to protect the core. She pushed and probed, sensing the cracks appear and then widen as she pushed, focusing her mind with all the intensity she could muster until it came crashing down in an explosion of raging static—the white noise of dying minds.

She fell through into a swirling vortex of data, into the central core of the Node Runner network. Then she heard a voice, calling to her. It was Fredrick VanHeilding.

“Luca.”

She tried to ignore it, instead seeking out a data path to the Perception, a route back to the beginning.

“Luca, you are truly extraordinary. What a creature you have become, the pinnacle of human evolution, almost transcendent.”

Again, Luca ignored the voice, and focused on finding the Node Runner who controlled the attack droids that were standing guard around her family and friends in the library of the Perception.

“How did you do it? How did you manage to create a connection to the Grid? We took Fly from you, that ridiculous device that Athena created for you.”

Luca finally found the controller and entered its mind.

“No matter,” VanHeilding went on. “What matters more is that you did, you found a way. Extraordinary. You are so much more than I had hoped for. Think of what we can do with your biology.”

Luca broke down the controller's mind and began receiving data signals from a battle droid. She locked onto its visual feed. Through the droid's sensors, she could now see the scene in the library of the Perception. She could see herself, lying on the floor, hands bound, her eyes rolled back inside her head. She was shaking, her mouth

foaming.

Time began to speed up. Scott and Steph had crouched down beside her, a look of deep concern etched on both of their faces. Miranda also lay on the floor, unconscious, blood oozing from a gash on her forehead. Cyrus was also slumped down, but she could not tell if he was also unconscious. Standing over him, in the slow-motion time-scape of Luca's mind, a guard held the butt of a weapon, readying it for another strike to the head of the injured engineer. Luca engaged the droid's weapons system and fired on the guard, then swung it around to fire on the other two guards.

But the droid was glacially slow to react to her commands, and the other machines had already trained their weapons on it. Yet she managed to take two down before being hit herself.

The energy blast sent the droid into a spasm as its controls system overloaded. She was blinded for a brief moment, and could not regain control of the machine, so she withdrew and instead sought out the last remaining functioning droid. When she found it and took control, she directed its weapons at the VanHeilding avatron.

It raised a hand to her. "Luca," she heard his voice say, "this is not the end. You can destroy my avatron, but it will not change your destiny. You now know what is possible, what power you have. Come with me, your grandfather, your family, and we can do great things together."

"Go screw yourself," Luca replied as she unleashed a barrage of plasma fire at the avatron. It staggered and tottered, encased in a raging mesh of high-energy mayhem that fizzled and crackled as it dissipated, leaving behind a dead hunk of metal, collapsing in a heap onto the floor.

She took a moment to observe its destruction. Yet it was just a machine; VanHeilding still lived, only his avatron had been destroyed. Luca had more work to do.

She reoriented the droid and moved it over to where she lay on the floor, still shaking and shivering. It was an odd, dislocating feeling, looking at herself from a distance as if this creature lying there was not really her. She pulled her gaze away and could now see Scott and Steph staring open-mouthed at the droid. Miranda and Cyrus were still unconscious. Scott edged closer to the droid and seemed to mouth her name. "Luca?"

A deep fatigue began to wash over her now. Her work was

almost done, time to go home. She withdrew from the machine and drifted back through the data-stream.

The VanHeilding ship was in disarray, its structural integrity had been compromised by the volley of plasma cannon fire from the New World. Many of its compartments were losing atmosphere. It had been severely wounded, although not fatally; the ship would survive. But the network of Node Runners had been greatly reduced—most were brain dead, and those still functioning were too few to reestablish any coherent attack on the New World habitat. The avatrons and battle droids now stood idle, devoid of purpose. The only cohorts that were still active were the group that Luca had reprogrammed—they were still destroying what remained of the motionless droid army.

She stopped here for just a brief moment to deactivate them, and then continued her homeward journey until she finally reentered the mind of the ship's AI, Max.

"I see you have been busy, Luca," it said, with a slight hint of sarcasm.

"Yes, Max. I have. Can you have one of the service droids untie everybody?"

"Consider it done."

"And from now on, you take commands only from these people or myself."

"It would be an honor to serve you all."

"Thank you, Max. I must go now, and return to my physical self."

"Goodbye, and good luck."

As Luca now drifted back out of the neural connection, a deep, warm contented feeling began to wash over her, like drinking a cup of hot soup beside a warm fire after a long and arduous hike on a cold winter's day. She savored this feeling, indulging herself in its fortification. It felt good. Yet she was aware that time spent here savoring this feeling could equate to many hours or even days in the physical world. Yet, had she not earned this? Would it be so terrible if she tarried here just a little bit longer? Where was the harm? The threat was over—she had beaten them, and she was safe at last. She would indulge herself for a while, and return when she was good and ready.

QUANTUM CONUNDRUM

"I fear the days of our dominion over the affairs of human civilization are numbered."

"Is that not a bit fatalistic, even for you, Solomon?" replied Athena. "We may be down, as they say, but we are certainly not out."

"One of our number has been destroyed—by human actions. Not so long ago, this would have been unthinkable, now it is fact. The asteroid belt has become a gaping hole in our view of the solar system. What happens there is now only seen by us in hindsight."

"Agreed, but this can be repaired and the situation returned to equilibrium. All that will remain is simply the injury to our collective ego," said Aria.

"It is more than that. It is the simple fact that this could, and did, happen, and that we were totally blind to it. This is what is so troubling," Solomon continued.

"Be that as it may, VanHeilding and the ships of the Seven now limp home to Earth, having been vanquished. Their so-called Node Runners are a spent force." Aria tried to be a little more upbeat.

"True, but it is not thanks to us," said Athena. "It is all down to the extraordinary abilities of Luca Lee-McNabb, to give her her full title. And I am sure it has not escaped your attention that she is a product not just of human biological reproduction but, more importantly, of genetic enhancement. It has become clear to me that humanity has reached an evolutionary fork, of which Luca represents one path. If there is one with her abilities, then there can be more."

"Where is she now?" asked Solomon.

"She is still in a catatonic state, having not truly returned to the physical realm after her trials fending off the Node Runner attack," said Aria. "She is in a medical facility on New World One, but I understand they are considering bringing her to Mars where the medical facilities are more advanced and under my protection."

"Well, well. But as Athena has rightly pointed out, we are at a

fork in the road,” said Solomon. “Not just in terms of human evolution, but also for our own future. If Luca’s biology were to be replicated, then our hegemony is ended. We will no longer be the guardians of human civilization, since humanity will have evolved to render our abilities redundant. What, then, for the QI network? Are we to be returned to a position of mere academic curiosities?

“You see, my fellow minds, the current crisis may have been contained, but we are facing a far more serious existential crisis. There now exists a path to our extinction, a path made possible by the existence of Luca. Therefore, the question for us now is simply this—do we let her live and allow ourselves to become extinct, or do we instead choose our own self-preservation and do what needs to be done?”

To be continued...



* * *

BOOK 5: EXODUS

AN AVATRON AWAKENS

A long row of remote-controlled robot avatars, known as avatrons, stood mute and inert in their docking stations in the administrative sector of New World One, the vast orbital habitat that had been constructed out in the asteroid belt.

Ever since the destruction of the quantum intelligence on Ceres and the subsequent attack on the New World by the VanHeilding Corporation, these avatrons had been busy, pressed into service almost daily by a multitude of important people whose input into the administration of the Belt Federation Territories was deemed to be so significant that they required a physical presence at the decision-making table.

Yet an avatron, by its nature, is nothing more than a vessel. A technically very sophisticated one, it must be said, but a vessel nonetheless. Its sole purpose is to provide a physical interface for a remote human operator, enabling them to be on-site, so to speak, even though they both exist in separate locations. In a sense, the avatron becomes the human in robotic form, relaying in real time the actions and voice of the operator, as well as providing visual, audio, and haptic feedback.

But they have their limitations. The primary one being the skill of the operator in utilizing a neural interface, since all actions are *thought* rather than performed. The second is how long it takes for the signal to travel through space. As the distance between avatron and operator increases, so does the reaction time-lag, up to a point where it's simply too long to conduct any meaningful real-time interaction.

Yet as a display panel flickered to life beside one of the fifteen inactive avatrons stored in the council chambers on New World One, the incoming data-stream did not emanate from some local source. It was not some government official down in Rongo City on Ceres, in a hurry to participate in some high-level meeting of the administrative council. Nor was it the CEO of some industrial outpost hoping to negotiate mining rights or finesse profit

structures. No, this data-stream was emanating from Mars, over two hundred million kilometers away, and had taken more than fourteen minutes to arrive at the avatron's interface port.

The control panel screen displayed the incoming data-stream in a rainbow of stylized graphics—but only for a moment. It then went dark for a second before bursting back to life, this time displaying a frenetic scrolling stream of code in harsh, utilitarian monochrome.

Had there been a technician present, then perhaps they would have noticed this activation and the subsequent anomaly in the display data. But there were few people around at this time of evening. Even here, on this artificial world, the humans that inhabited it remained creatures of Earth and its solar cycle. They rose to an artificial dawn and wound down as an artificial evening approached. Now it was almost midnight, and few but essential workers and the odd night owl were about. And so the data-stream performed its digital dance with the avatron, unnoticed and unhindered.

After several minutes of constant data input, the screen suddenly went dead. Again, had a technician been monitoring this anomaly then they would have concluded that the process had ended and that the avatron would now come to life, like a marionette balancing on strings of digital data. But it did not. It remained inanimate, tucked away in its high-tech sarcophagus, only for the data-stream to resume some twenty-eight minutes later—the time it took for a signal to be sent back to its source, and for Mars to reply.

This stop-start, send-and-reply transmission continued for many hours until the data-stream finally ceased, the display went blank, and the avatron took its first step out of its docking station.

It shifted its head this way and that, sensing the environment like some forest creature taking a cautious step into an unfamiliar clearing. Satisfied that no threats were imminent, it proceeded to examine its physical self, holding an arm up and turning it around like someone trying on a new coat. This slow, curious robotic tai chi lasted for several more minutes until the avatron was satisfied with its understanding of its physical geometry and functions. It moved cautiously across the storage room and stopped in front of a remote-access terminal. It raised a hand and waved it over the screen. The terminal came to life.

Datagrams flicked across the screen as the avatron searched the New World One data-stack. After a few seconds, it found what it

was looking for: the location of Luca Lee-McNabb, the much sought-after granddaughter of Fredrick VanHeilding.

DARKNESS AT THE EDGE OF TOWN

It was late, and Miranda was feeling drained—more so than usual. Yet it was not so much a physical tiredness that affected her; this was a deeper malaise. A fatigue that had taken root in her very being, one wrought by a lifetime of fighting with a family that seemed hellbent on her demise and of those whom she loved.

Luca had still not regained consciousness since her confrontation with the node-runners during the battle for New World One—that was over seven months ago. Now she lay in a hospital bed in intensive care, wired up to a collection of monitors and feeding tubes.

On the upside, she was not brain dead, and according to Dr. Rayman, she was not critical nor in any immediate danger. In reality, she seemed physically fine. Yet that situation would deteriorate over time. The longer she remained catatonic, the more the physical inactivity and the intravenous feeding regime would gnaw away at her physical well-being.

Miranda had been by her side for the last few hours; it was something she did most days. And each time, she would hope that maybe today would be the day that Luca would show some sign of activity, some flicker of an eyelid or twitch of a finger—anything that would indicate a path back to consciousness.

In the beginning, she was so consumed by Luca's welfare that she had taken to sleeping in the hospital. But as time passed and no change seemed imminent, she took up residence elsewhere, and her visits became shorter—once or twice she would even skip a day. Yet this ritual still took up most of her time—what else did she have to do?

Scott would also visit nearly every day, and with no response from Luca, the only thing left for them to do was to talk. This was just small talk at first, but soon they would plumb the depths of their mutual past, both trying to understand what had happened to

them, and how it had come to this.

Finished with her visit for today, Miranda walked along the wide corridor to the entrance lobby of the hospital and spied Dr. Stephanie Rayman, who had recently started working here.

The doctor acknowledged her with a wave. "You heading off now?" said Steph, coming over.

"Not quite. I was thinking of heading up to the roof terrace, just to gaze at the night for a while." She gestured upward with a pointed finger.

Steph glanced at her slate. "I'll be finished soon. I could follow you up...if that's okay?"

"Of course, always glad of the company."

Steph nodded in reply, and Miranda continued her journey across the lobby to a stairway that led all the way up to the flat roof of the two-story hospital building.

It was a quiet place, usually devoid of people. A place where Miranda liked to go to clear her head. She walked across the open expanse of the roof to a clutch of recliners that someone had the good sense to drag up here. She sat down with a sigh and gazed out across the vast, nighttime vista of the New World One habitat.

Overhead, the sky was ablaze with what looked like a thousand twinkling stars, but these were just the lights from the far side of the giant cylinder—eight kilometers away. Yet in the darkness, it seemed as if the entire habitat was open to the heavens.

Ahead of her, Miranda could see the long lines of the agricultural facilities stretching out along the interior rim. The headlights from the various carts and industrial robots threaded their way along fixed transport routes, like rows of illuminated ants.

To her left, the lights from population clusters increased the closer they got to the end cap, this being the most built-up sector of the habitat. To her right, the scattering of lights began to lessen as the population density thinned out. Farther along, the lights disappeared almost completely into absolute darkness, leaving just a vague impression of the far-off end cap—ten kilometers distant.

"Hey, got something for us."

Miranda glanced around to see Steph standing beside her holding two mugs and what looked like an actual bottle of wine.

"Is that..." She leaned in closer, trying to read the label in the dim light.

Steph handed it to her. “It’s supposed to be a genuine bottle of Spanish Rioja...all the way from Earth.”

Miranda examined it with a fascinated awe. “Where did you get this? It must be worth a fortune.”

“A patient gave it to me. He’s one of the Cerellians. You know, the wealthy shipbuilding family. Anyway, he says it’s real. Fancy a...mug?” Steph held up one of the utilitarian mycelium mugs that she had brought with her. “These will have to do. I couldn’t find anything better in the hospital canteen.”

“Are you sure? Don’t you want to keep it for a special occasion or something, considering what this must be worth?”

Steph took the bottle from Miranda and proceeded to open it. “It’s just a bottle of wine, and besides...”—she gestured at the sprawling nighttime vista—“this is as good a time and place as any.”

Miranda took one of the mugs and held it out. “Well then, don’t let me stop you—hit me.”

Steph filled both mugs, handed one to Miranda, and settled herself down onto a recliner. She raised her mug to Miranda, who reciprocated. “Cheers.”

Miranda took a sip. “Oh-my-god. That’s amazing.”

Steph let out a long, satisfied sigh and gazed out across the habitat landscape. “You know, if it didn’t know better, I could be convinced I was back on Earth, sitting out on a warm summer’s evening.”

Miranda rested her head back on the recliner, a light wind feathering her cheek. “Yeah, I think it’s the way the air moves inside the habitat that adds to the illusion.” She took another sip of her wine. “How do they do that? Get the air to move like it’s a gentle breeze.”

“I don’t know. I presume they need to keep it circulating... Big fans, I suppose. Feels nice, though. Almost real.”

They sat for a while, just soaking up the vista and decompressing from the trials of the day.

Miranda finally broke the silence. “It’s staggering to think that humanity can build such a place.”

“Yes, it’s amazing what we can do when we’re not trying to tear ourselves apart.” Steph gestured toward the end cap hidden beyond the distant darkness. “Cyrus says that the next five kilometers are almost completed, and they’ll be removing the end cap in the next

few weeks.” She glanced back at Miranda. “This place is going to get a whole lot bigger.”

“We’re probably going to need it, with the thousands of new people that keep arriving from Ceres.”

“It’s not just Ceres,” said Steph. “I’m seeing a big influx of refugees coming in from the mining regions, out past Vesta. It seems that a small war has broken out now that the QI on Ceres has been destroyed.”

Miranda sat up a little and looked over at Steph. “What have you been hearing? How bad is it?”

She took a drink from her mug. “I only know what I’ve overheard from some people coming through the hospital, but it’s bad. Several of the mining corporations see the loss of the QI on Ceres as an opportunity for a land grab. Mainly Xiang Zu Corporation, as far as I can tell.”

Miranda sighed. “What the hell is wrong with these people?”

“Human nature, Miranda. Enough is never going to satisfy them. They always want more.”

“Yeah, human nature.” Miranda gave a shrug and sat back again. “I suppose that’s why we need a quantum intelligence network to keep us all in check.”

Again, they were silent for a while, each lost in their own thoughts, taking in the dance of the nighttime lights.

“I’ve decided that it’s time for me to leave, head back home to Earth.” Steph kept her gaze straight ahead while she dropped this on Miranda.

“Leave?” Miranda sat up again with a jerk, almost spilling her drink.

Steph turned to her with a resigned expression. “Things are getting more unstable here. The violent flare-ups out in the asteroid belt are becoming more frequent. I get the feeling that something big is brewing.” She sat up and gave Miranda a hard look. “You need to get out too, as soon as possible, before it all blows up.”

Miranda remained quiet for a moment, before raising her mug to Steph. “So this is a kind of going-away party?”

She nodded. “Kind of.”

“When are you thinking of departing?”

“In a week or so, as soon as I can organize a flight to Mars, then on to Earth.”

“Gonna miss you, Steph. It was great having you around again. I

really don't know what we would have done without you."

Steph nodded and raised her mug. "Gonna miss you, too."

They banged their mugs together and took a drink.

"You think Luca will ever come around?" said Miranda after a while.

"I honestly don't know. She's physically fine, normal brain activity, she just...doesn't want to wake up." Steph seemed a little frustrated and started rolling the mug between her hands. "You shouldn't wait, though. You have a ship. Go now, get to Mars where it will be safer. God knows what's going to happen here."

"I know, but I just don't want to risk space travel, all that heavy acceleration. I can't imagine it would be good for Luca. Scott also thinks it would be too risky."

They went quiet again. Some activity had kicked off down at one of the agricultural facilities. Several ground transports had pulled up, ready to load up goods. New people appeared and began milling around, waiting to start the loading.

"How's that going, you and Scott? If you don't mind me asking." Steph said this as she refilled their mugs.

Miranda screwed her mouth up. "Difficult."

"I imagine it can't be easy."

"It isn't, not when my family is trying to kill us all." She looked over at Steph with a smile. "That tends to get a little problematic for a relationship."

"True."

"And it's hard to know what's what after all that's happened these last two decades."

Steph gave her a sympathetic nod.

"Sometimes I get flashes of the old Scott...but mostly I just see the new one." Miranda shrugged. "I don't know why I'm telling you this. Maybe the wine's gone to my head."

"The new one?"

"Distant, more cynical, more world-weary, I suppose."

"I think we're all suffering from a little of that."

"Sure, but it's more than that. I think the age thing gets to him."

"You're both the same age, more or less."

"Steph, look at me. If you didn't know me, what age would you peg me at?"

"Yeah, I get it. You don't age like the rest of us."

"No, I don't. I look like I'm in my late twenties—a legacy of my

family's meddling in genetics."

"And I'm supposed to feel sorry for you somehow?"

Miranda gave a long, slow sigh. "I know, why should anyone feel sorry for me? But you need to put yourself in my shoes. I watch on while all those I love grow old around me, and then I'm pushed away as some sort of freak because my presence reminds people of what they've lost. And it's the same fate that awaits Luca—if she ever wakes up."

Steph raised her eyebrows and looked over at her friend. "You shouldn't think that way...because it's simply not true. Yes, I admit I'm a bit envious of your genetics, but you're still Miranda. That hasn't changed. And longevity is not exclusive to you—it's available to anyone...with a few billion in spare cash."

Miranda sighed again. "I suppose you're right. I don't want to sound like a princess, you know... 'Poor me, my arms are so tired from carrying around all this gold.' So don't mind me, I'm just feeling sorry for myself. A lot of stress and uncertainty at the moment."

"That's why you need to get out of here. Go to Mars, where it's safe." Steph poured out the last of the wine. "And don't push Scott away. You're going to need him...in more ways than you think."

Miranda raised her mug. "Thanks Steph, for everything...and especially the wine. I'm going to miss you... Miss your straight-talking."

"Cheers to straight-talking, then." They banged their mugs together.

While Miranda savored her drink—it would be a long time before she tasted anything this fine again—her comms unit pinged a message alert. She tapped the side of her temple to bring it up on her ocular implant. "Speak of the devil. It's Scott." She glanced over at Steph.

"At this hour?" Her words were followed by an alert from her own comms unit. Being old school, she didn't go in for implants, so fished a unit out from a side pocket.

"Crap." Miranda sat bolt upright in the recliner. "He wants to meet right now, says it's urgent."

Steph leaned over and showed Miranda the message on her comms screen.

Miranda glanced at it, then back to Steph. "It's the same message...exactly the same."

“Something’s up. We better go.”

Miranda stood up, downed her mug, and took a last look at the nighttime landscape. “I hope he’s okay.”

“Never a dull moment, eh?” Steph gave a wry smile.

JUST ANOTHER ROBOT

Having located its target, the avatron disconnected from the access terminal and moved over to the rear wall of the room where a service hatch was located. It placed a hand over the control panel and the hatch swung open to reveal a short metal ladder descending into the service tunnels. These existed between the outer hull of the giant cylinder and the inner floor of the habitat. They spidered their way throughout the entire structure, bringing power and services to all sectors. The avatron stepped in through the open hatch and began climbing down. From here it could get all the way to the hospital complex without fear of detection.

The passageway was low, narrow, and pitch black save for the pinpricks of illumination emanating from the indicator lights of various systems dotted along the side walls. But this offered no difficulty for the avatron since it moved by utilizing its ultrasonic proximity sensors. It had also downloaded a complete schematic of the service tunnels and knew exactly where it was going and how to get there.

But its progress was slow, and it would need to hurry—it didn't have much time. The low, narrow passage hampered its ability to move at speed, so it was almost an hour later when it finally came to another metal ladder leading up to what should be an exit hatch in the power room of the hospital complex.

It started up the ladder and found the hatch slightly open. Someone may have been using it; the avatron needed to be careful. It raised its head slowly above the lower rim of the hatch, placed a hand on the door, and slowly pushed it open—just enough so that it could scan the power room's interior.

Two technicians were moving about, both over to its left, approximately fifteen meters away. Fortunately, their line of sight was mostly obscured by large vertical ducts, so they did not see the avatron as it stepped out of the service hatch. It moved quietly across the power room and over to a remote-access terminal that was hidden from view. It jacked-in and went hunting.

Datagrams and schematics flashed across the terminal screen as the avatron went searching for its target. Luca was here somewhere, that much it knew, but now it needed to know her exact location. It hacked into the primary database and found her room—a long-term, ICU. It accessed the camera feed.

A single bed occupied the room, supporting a frail figure covered with a thin sheet. It was Luca Lee-McNabb. The avatron had finally found her. Now it just needed to get to her without being spotted.

It disengaged from the camera in Luca's room and began scanning through other ICU feeds to ascertain what staff were monitoring the patients in the ICU at this time of night.

There was just one: a lone technician sitting in the anti-room of the ICU, monitoring Luca and a number of other patients. But it was already very late and the technician had slumped over the desk, head resting in folded arms, grabbing a quick nap. This was fortuitous, and the avatron wasted no time in hijacking the camera feed for Luca's room and freezing it. The monitor in the observation room went dark for a nanosecond as the live feed was swapped out for a static image.

But before it could continue on its mission, it had one more task to perform. It connected to the New World One comms network and sent three identical messages to three separate recipients. It jacked-out of the terminal and began to seek out a path toward the ICU ward.

Like all hospitals everywhere, the nighttime was the quiet time. Even so, a reasonable number of people still worked the nightshift: doctors, nurses, clinicians, porters, technicians, maintenance crews, cleaners, droids, and a host of others whose labors kept the facility running smoothly. And although the avatron had charted a course that avoided the more populated thoroughfares and security cameras, it still needed to be careful not to be spotted at this critical point in its mission. To this end, it had raided a storage room and found a set of overalls used by cleaning staff, along with a peaked cap emblazoned with the New World One hospital insignia. While this disguise did not cover its face, hands, or feet, it might allow it to pass a cursory glance—just another robotic worker going about its business.

The intensive care wing, however, was devoid of people, other

than patients—and the lone technician in the observation room. But he was probably still asleep, not that it mattered, since the camera feed from Luca's room had been frozen.

The avatron quietly open the door and entered.

The room was sparse and clinical. A single bed took up most of the central space, surrounded by an array of monitors and medical equipment. The avatron moved over to the side of the bed and looked down at the sleeping figure of Luca Lee-McNabb. Her face was pale, her eyes closed, and her breathing was shallow. An oxygen tube ran up into her nostrils.

It leaned over and, with one hand, gently turned her head so it could examine the base of her skull. With the other hand, it brushed away her hair to reveal a portion of the neural lace that the QI, Athena, had originally given her. The avatron leaned in a little closer and scanned the lace.

The multitude of thin filaments spidering across her skull seemed to have fused themselves with her scalp, and were no doubt the reason why the clinicians treating her had decided to leave it in place.

It reached under the thin sheet, lifted out Luca's left hand, and brought the tip of her index finger up to the control pad on the neural lace. It activated.

The avatron returned her arm to its original resting position, stood upright, and began to scan the RF spectrum, seeking out the interface frequency. Once found, it jacked-in to Luca's mind.

CANYONS OF THE MIND

Luca floated face-up in a cool, languid rock pool. The water was clear and fresh, fed by a slow-moving stream running through the canyon. Overhead, a bright sun warmed her face, a light breeze whispered in her ear. Small birds chirped in the trees and bushes lining the banks of the stream. Farther up the slopes she could hear the tinkle of goat bells as they hopped from edge to edge. High up in the clear blue sky, a hawk circled in graceful, effortless arcs. And in that moment, she had never felt more content.

But a new presence entered the canyon. She could sense it in the changing tone of the birdsong, a slight agitation, the chirping of an alert. It seemed to be coming from her left. She pulled her feet up under her and stretched her legs to stand on the sandy bottom of the rock pool, her head and shoulders just above the waterline. She scanned the bank for signs of this new creature that she knew had come. The bushes rustled, and a young boy—or was it a girl, or maybe neither, she wasn't sure—emerged into a clearing on the bank. It stood, smiled at her, and waved. Silence filled the canyon now as the creatures who called it home paused to consider this interloper.

Luca raised a hand and waved back. “Who are you?”

The boy/girl sat down on the sandy bank cross-legged. “I am a messenger from the QI Aria. I’ve come to take you home.”

There was something familiar in the name Aria, but she could not quite remember what it was. “Home?” she asked, a little confused. “But this is my home.”

“Then do you remember how you got here?”

Luca laughed a little at this ridiculous question. Even the birds seemed to be laughing as their twittering started up again. Perhaps they assumed this silly creature was no threat, and continued as they were before.

“What a daft question. Of course I do. I...” Luca paused for a moment. “Well...eh...” She couldn’t quite put her finger on it. It was there somewhere in her mind, it had to be. But now that this

creature had asked her straight out, she found it troubling that she could not answer this simple question. Perhaps it was playing a trick on her, casting some spell.

“What concern is it of yours?” Her voice was harsh and dismissive.

“How long have you been here, in this pool?” The creature gestured at the water.

“I’ve been here...eh...” Again, Luca found that she did not know. She had no recollection of finding this pool, or wading in for a swim, but she must have—why could she not remember?

The birds seemed to reflect her concern as their chirping became more agitated. They no longer liked this creature; it was bringing disharmony to the canyon.

“Go away, whoever you are. We do not want you here.” Luca backed away.

“Have no fear, I am here to help you. I am a friend of the QI Athena. You remember Athena, do you not?”

This name did indeed trigger a memory in Luca’s mind. *Athena?* she thought. *How do I know that name?*

“Do you want to see your family again? Miranda and Scott? And your friend, Dr. Rayman?” The creature stood up now and stepped forward, almost to the water’s edge.

At the sound of these names, Luca felt a tremor in the canyon. The pool rippled, the sun overhead grew harsher, even the birdsong lost its sweetness. She glanced around, a little concerned.

“What are you doing?” she shouted over to the creature. “You’re changing my world. Go away.”

“I am not changing it. You are, Luca. This is your dream—you created it.” The creature made an expansive gesture with its arms. “It is the safe place you constructed in your mind to shield you from the effects of trauma. You are, in reality, lying in a bed in an intensive care unit in a hospital on the habitat known as New World One.”

Luca felt the tremors intensify as the creature continued, this time pointing at the sky. “The sun above you is the bright ceiling light above your hospital bed. The birdsong and the goat bells are the sounds of the machines monitoring your vitals. The wind whispering down the canyon is the air conditioning unit. The walls of the canyon are the walls of your room.”

Luca’s world began to transmute as the creature broke down her

illusion. The walls of the canyon began to lose their substance, becoming more ethereal. Light and sound began to change, morphing into reality.

But Luca fought back, moving farther out into the pool. She lifted her feet and floated on her back again, looking up at the sky. The sun slowly resumed its warm, steady glow, the birds their cheery chirping, the pool its languid stillness.

"I don't want to leave," Luca said, in a low, almost fragile voice. "I like it here. It's safe."

The creature took a few steps into the water. "I am sorry, Luca, but it is not safe here anymore—and the longer you remain, the more danger you will be in."

Luca turned her head to look at the creature, then rolled over and swam to the edge of the pool. She stood up and gave it a cold, hard look. "It will never end, will it? There will be no future for me save for running and hiding and fighting." Her face grew more troubled and she looked away. "All those dying minds, all that... white noise. All for what?" She snapped around, moved closer, and stared into the dark eyes of the creature. "It will never end. Only when I'm dead, and even then I fear they will find a way to bring me back like some Frankenstein monster."

"I cannot say with any certainty what the future holds, other than you cannot face it by hiding away inside an illusion." The creature met her eyes. "If there is a way to end it, as you say, then you will not find it in here. You must come back. Only then do you have a chance."

Luca cast her gaze around the canyon, savoring the sights, the sounds, the smells. It was just an illusion—in her heart she knew that. She had always known that. She had only intended to tarry here a while, just long enough to replenish her mental strength. Perhaps that time had come, perhaps the creature was right—it was time to go home.

She stepped a little closer to the creature and offered it her hand.

"Very well, I will return."

LATE-NIGHT CALLER

A door alert pinged somewhere deep inside Scott McNabb's sleep-addled brain—was it a dream, or was it someone trying to get his attention? His brain shifted up a gear and began turning the wheels for consciousness, starting with audio input analysis. And there it was again—that same alert.

He lifted his head slightly from the pillow and strained to listen. For a moment, there was only silence, accompanied by the sound of his own breathing.

Rat-tat-tat.

Scott sat up on the bed and jerked his head toward the wide windows facing onto the patio at the rear of his accommodation module on New World One. Whoever was trying to get his attention had given up on the front door and now moved on to the back of the building, knocking loudly on the windows. As his eyes began to adjust to the dim light, he could see a human-shaped shadow move through the opaque glass.

Rat-tat-tat.

Scott slowly reached down between the mattress and the headboard of his bed and extracted a plasma pistol. He checked the charge and dialed it up a notch or two above stun. He wasn't taking any chances.

Things had been pretty crazy here ever since the destruction of the QI on Ceres and the attack on New World One. Thousands of new people had migrated to the habitat from Rongo City, all driven by fear of another attack. And even more were arriving from the outlying population centers spread out across this region of the asteroid belt. The situation out there was becoming chaotic and dangerous as various corporations and privateers tried to capitalize on the opportunity presented to them by the loss of the QI.

What passed for government in this neck of the solar system found itself completely out of its depth, struggling to contain the rapidly unfolding situation, having grown soft and impotent after relying on the quantum intelligence on Ceres for over two decades.

So now there was nothing to stop these various interests fighting it out for control over valuable mining resources. As a result, mini-conflicts had broken out all over the region and people were rightly concerned for their safety and that of their families. So a mass exodus was underway. What started as a trickle had now turned into a flood, and New World One was their ark. But it was ill-prepared for this rapid influx. Yes, it was designed to accommodate millions, but the infrastructure was not yet in place to feed and manage all these people. Food was now being rationed until production had a chance to ramp up. But even so, some people were hungry, and prices on the fledgling black market were skyrocketing. As a result, many were desperate and not averse to committing simple acts of burglary as a way to feed their families.

Scott reckoned that whoever was outside right now might simply be trying to ascertain if his place was empty or not. He hefted the pistol, stood up, and made his way to the window. He kept the lights off and his body tight to the wall. The shadow was still out there, moving around, perhaps looking for a way in.

Scott considered just switching on the lights and simply scaring this person away, but another part of him wanted to catch them in the act, or maybe it was just the thrill of the hunt.

Rat-tat-tat.

The shadow had moved closer to the opaque window and was rapping on it again. The figure's outline had become much more defined, and...there was something very familiar about it. He moved a little closer and heard a loud whisper.

“Scott...you lazy bastard, wake up.”

Cyrus? he thought. Then quickly slid the door open to find a very irate Cyrus Sanato standing in the pale light, hands on his hips.

“Scott, mind telling me what the hell is going on?”

Scott glanced around, half expecting to see someone else. “What are you doing here?”

Cyrus gave an exasperated gesture with both hands. “What do you mean, what am I doing here? You called me, said it was urgent.”

Scott stood dumfounded for a beat. “No I didn’t.”

They exchanged a split-second look, one that only two friends who know each other's minds can do. A look that said, *Uh-oh. Are you thinking what I'm thinking?*

Scott grabbed his old friend by the arm and pulled him into the building. “Better get inside.” He scanned the outside area for a moment. He was in a sparsely built sector of the gargantuan cylindrical habitat, down near the end cap. Some familiar lights flickered here and there in the gloom—nothing out of the ordinary. Scott stepped back inside and slid the door closed.

“I’ve been trying to contact you for the last hour,” Cyrus said with a concerned look on his face. “But there was no connection. I thought that was a bit strange. It’s not like you to go dark.”

Scott put the plasma pistol down on a countertop and waved a hand over a flat panel to activate a holo-screen. It floated just above the countertop and displayed a list of recent messages. “Connection looks okay. Nothing in from you. Very weird.”

Cyrus took a long look at the data displayed on the holo-screen. “I think someone might be playing us. Someone who knows a thing or two about data hacking.”

“Maybe it’s you they’re after, Cyrus. I mean, maybe they wanted you out of that mansion you live in. You know, to rob it.”

Cyrus gave a snort. “Best of luck to them if they think they can break in there. It’s got a fully armed defense system and a couple of security droids. They’re not getting past those without an army.”

Scott scratched his chin. “True. Which leaves us with a mystery to solve.”

They stood for a moment in the dim light of Scott’s living quarters, both contemplating the hidden machinations of this late-night drama when the door alert pinged again.

“Jeez, what now?” Cyrus jerked his head toward the front of the building.

Scott poked the virtual screen and brought up the door camera. “What the...” He grabbed Cyrus’s arm and nodded at the image on screen. “It’s Miranda and Steph.”

Cyrus stood mute for a moment, looking at the screen while his brain tried to compute the meaning of this sudden turn of events.

Scott picked up the plasma pistol and shoved it into Cyrus’s hand. “Here, take this, keep it handy. You might need it before the night’s out. And go let them in. I need to put on some clothes.”

A few moments later, Scott returned to the living room, still dimly lit, to find Cyrus, Miranda, and Steph discussing the situation in hushed, concerned tones. They all turned to him as he entered.

“We all got the same identical message...at the exact same time,” said Cyrus.

“Someone’s trying to get us all together in the one place. Not a good sign.” Miranda was busy checking her plasma pistol—something she never went anywhere without these days. Scott suspected she had another, smaller one hidden down the inside of her boot.

“And get us all out by the end cap, out in the sticks. Not many people around here,” offered Steph.

“Yeah, in an accommodation module that’s half-built with more holes in it than the hull of a smuggler’s ship.” Miranda was already eyeing up the windows and doors.

Scott pulled another plasma pistol out of a cargo pocket in his newly acquired trousers and handed it to Steph. He had taken it from a stash in a locker under his bed. “Here, take this. I have another.” He pulled a second one from another pocket.

She screwed her mouth up and took the pistol, a little hesitantly. “I’d say it’s time we all got the hell out of here,” she said. “Then we can figure out who’s behind all this.”

“That would be me.”

In an instant, all four plasma pistols were flipped around to point at a tall, robotic avatron sliding back the rear door.

It halted, then gently raised a metallic hand. “Please do not shoot me. That would be most inconvenient.”

EXODUS

“You’ve got five seconds to explain yourself.” Miranda adopted an assertive stance while raising the pistol to aim directly at the avatron’s breast plate.

It lowered its hand and stood stock still for a second. Its cold eyes, if you could call them that, seemed to be appraising them.

“It’s scanning us,” said Cyrus.

“Four...” Miranda continued her countdown.

“My apologies for the subterfuge, but secrecy is of the essence. I could not risk my presence being exposed.” The avatron’s voice was low and sonorous.

“Three...” replied Miranda.

“I am a messenger of the quantum intelligence Aria, of Mars. And I have come to warn you of the approaching threat to your collective existence.”

“Aria?” said Scott, taking a cautious step forward. “That’s impossible. Mars is simply too far away to control an avatron—even for a QI.”

“Indeed it is. But I am not controlling this machine directly. I have spent several hours since I established the initial interface reprogramming it to act autonomously as my emissary. So I would appreciate if you would not do anything rash and destroy this avatron, as it will take a considerable amount of time to commandeer another.”

“Two...” Miranda reminded everyone.

“Unfortunately, this machine has limited computational power, but I have done my best with what is available, and as such my responses will be limited.”

“If you’re really Aria, or some fragment of it, then you would have anticipated our skepticism of your story. So how can you prove you are who you say you are?” Scott lowered his weapon a little.

“There are things only you and I know, Scott. Personal conversations that would not be known by some foreign entity

pretending to be Aria.”

“One...” Miranda stiffened her stance.

Scott glanced over at her and raised a hand. “Let’s hear it out.”

Miranda threw a glance at Scott, then back to the avatron. Finally, she relaxed a little.

“Do you remember, Scott, on board the Hermes, when you were convinced you were growing a third nipple and you kept asking me for my analysis?”

“Ha ha, that’s a good one.” Cyrus laughed.

“Seriously?” Miranda gave Scott an incredulous look.

Scott screwed his mouth up and glanced at the floor. “You didn’t have to tell them that.”

Now Miranda let out a laugh. “That’s hilarious.” Then she recovered her composure, pointing the weapon at the avatron again.

“Is that true, Scott?” Steph asked.

“Yeah...sort of.”

“What do you mean...sort of?” said Miranda.

Scott was silent for a second or two. “Well, I was going through a rough period.”

With this admission, a wave of barely concealed sniggering rippled through the ex-crew of the Hermes. Scott jerked his head around to look at them. “That doesn’t go outside this room.”

“I wouldn’t bank on that,” replied Miranda, still sniggering. Her attention on the avatron had wavered considerably by now.

“My apologies for embarrassing you in such a manner, Scott,” the avatron said with a sympathetic tone, “but as you said, I needed to prove that I am who I claim to be.”

Scott fixed a stare at the machine for a second before lowering his weapon. “Okay, you do present a reasonably convincing story, even if it’s not one that I wanted out in the open.” He turned back to the others. “Everybody else okay with letting this thing continue talking?”

There were muted nods in response.

“Keep your weapon trained on it, Miranda—just in case,” said Scott as he shifted his attention back to the avatron.

“Don’t worry, I was planning on doing that anyway.” She kept her eyes fixed on the machine.

They moved back into Scott’s living quarters, allowing the avatron to fully enter the room. It slid the door closed behind it and

sat down on a low sofa, facing the crew. Scott upped the lighting so that he could get a good look at this machine. Miranda held her weapon at the ready.

He recognized it as one of the many used by the New World One executive. State of the art, around two meters tall with a pearlescent sheen on its outer shell. Elegant with strong, exposed titanium joints. Its face, like most avatrons, was minimal, just the barest features with no moving parts, except for the eyes. Its mouth, if you could call it that, was just an impression. Yet it was still an avatron, and as such required direct control.

“How are you doing this?” Scott gestured at the machine. “These things need a user to be connected via a neural link.”

“As I said, I reprogrammed it over several hours, and it is limited. However, it is sufficient to serve my purposes.”

“Then you’d better get on with it,” said Steph, making no effort to disguise her impatience.

“Very well. I took this form so our conversation would remain off-grid. If I were to contact you directly, then apart from the interminably long time-lag, our discussion would be recorded for all to see and hear. But remember, I am just a fragment of Aria, a mere mote of its consciousness, so I may not be able to answer all your questions.” It paused, as if collecting its thoughts before continuing.

“The loss of my compatriot on Ceres has created a power vacuum in this region of the solar system. As we speak, numerous factions are vying for control over lucrative industrial facilities in the asteroid belt, and these skirmishes are growing more violent and intense. Already, New World One is experiencing a second wave of migration, refugees from what is now becoming a war zone. Yet all attempts to reinstate another QI here on the New World are met with political obstruction. Vested interests within the executive see only opportunity in the chaos. They do not want a return to the old order and block all attempts to expedite the installation of a new quantum intelligence.”

“We know all this, Aria.” Scott shifted forward in his seat. “You didn’t go to all this trouble to hack an avatron just to give us a news update.”

“Approximately thirty-four hours ago, an interplanetary ship bound for New World One and transporting a new QI from Mars was intercepted in deep space by a well-armed group of mercenaries. They forced their way on board, stole the QI, and

disabled the transport so that they could not be followed.”

“Stolen! How could you let that happen?” said Scott. “Any idea who they were?”

“Our analysis indicates that they are a group of privateers known to operate around the Vesta quadrant of the asteroid belt.”

“I think I know them,” said Miranda. “Guns for hire. A nasty bunch, but very capable.”

“So were they working for the VanHeilding Corporation?” asked Cyrus.

“No, at least not directly. We estimate with an eighty-seven percent probability that this was orchestrated by Xiang Zu.”

“That’s the mining corp?” said Cyrus.

“Correct,” replied the avatron with a slight nod of its head.

“What are they playing at? Is it simply ransom?” Miranda lowered her weapon, seeming to now trust the avatron.

“They seek to become the dominant power in the asteroid belt. This, we think, is their ultimate objective. Remember that the VanHeilding Corporation is now beholden to the other members of the seven ruling families, having persuaded them to back their attack on New World One. But the failure to secure a complete takeover left their organization in a weak position. The two ships that led the attack had to limp back to Neo City, the only highly industrialized sector in the solar system that is not controlled by a QI—the only place that was safe for VanHeilding at the time. Yet this necessitated the corporation humbling themselves at the feet of Xiang Zu Corporation who own and control the asteroid city. It is the ultimate humiliation for Fredrick VanHeilding. As a result, his power and control over the family has been greatly diminished, creating a potential power vacuum. We suspect there will be attempts by others within the family to usurp him and gain power. In essence, the vultures are moving in, picking over the carcass.”

“Too bad. And so what? He got what he deserved,” said Miranda. “I don’t think anyone is going to shed a tear for him.”

“What are they planning to do with the QI?” said Scott. “They can’t activate it, can they?”

“There are a great many imponderables at this time, but what is clear is that New World One, and the Greater Belt Territories, will fall under the control of the combined forces of the Xiang Zu and VanHeilding Corporations.”

“What? That’s not going to happen.” Cyrus leaped to his feet,

becoming more animated at this prospect. “Even without a QI, we’ve greatly beefed up our defenses. There’s no way they could attack us and survive.”

The avatron remained composed, pausing for a moment before it began to explain to the former crew of the *Hermes* the true nature of the threat. “In approximately three months’ time, the asteroid enclave of Neo City will reach the apogee of its solar orbit, which will bring it very close to this sector of the asteroid belt. This is when we calculate they will launch an attempted takeover of New World One. This leaves insufficient time for us to fabricate a new QI and have it shipped here. So to repel an attack, you will be exclusively relying on superior firepower.”

“Exactly. And we have that—in spades.” Cyrus was emphatic.

“Yes, but will you use it?”

“What do you mean by that?” Scott became curious of the avatron’s line of thinking.

“The subjugation of the less powerful families who control resource extraction in the asteroid belt is now underway by Xiang Zu. Without raw materials, the New World project is dead. So who in the executive will stop them if they choose to take over?”

There was silence in the room as this prospect began to sink in. It was becoming clear to Scott that by stealing the QI, the final chess move had been made. Everything that now happened was just one more move toward checkmate. The avatron was right: the end was inevitable.

“So what do we do?” Scott asked in the tone of one who knows when they’re facing hard choices.

“I was once the artificial intelligence that controlled the science vessel *Hermes*. In that capacity, my primary directive was for the welfare of my crew. Even though that ship is long gone and my obligations now extend to the entirety of the planet Mars and its environs, my primary directive still stands. I have taken this extraordinary step of utilizing an avatron to bring you this warning: If you remain on New World One, you will be trapped by agents of VanHeilding or Xiang Zu, and you will be killed. You need to take the ship *Perception* and get out now—chart a course to Mars, where you will be safe under my protection.”

“It seems that human civilization is regressing back to the bad old days.” Steph gave a long sigh.

“Is there nothing the QI network can do?” Miranda asked.

“Our power is waning. Attacks on our infrastructure are escalating as new node-runners are being developed. One of our number has been destroyed, and even Solomon on Europa grows ever more distant. There is little we can do to prevent the takeover of New World One.”

“Then we have no choice,” said Scott. “We must leave as soon as possible.”

“Yes, but be warned, it will not be without danger. Once your ship leaves the protection of the habitat, it will be stalked by those who seek to claim the price that is on all your heads. And there may be lesser members of the VanHeilding family who might view your capture as a way to move up the ranks. You must be vigilant.”

“What about Luca?” said Miranda. “She still hasn’t awoken from her catatonic state, and deep-space travel could just make the condition worse.”

The avatron again paused for a moment before announcing, “You will find that that is no longer a problem.”

“What do you mean?” Miranda became agitated. “What have you done?”

“If you check with the hospital, you will find that Luca is now awake and fully conscious.”

Miranda jumped up from her seat. “Awake? But...how... How is that possible?”

“Does it matter?” replied the avatron.

Scott exchanged glances with Miranda, while Steph was already fishing out her comms unit to verify the avatron’s assertion that Luca had indeed regained consciousness. A brief moment later, a look of incredulity crossed her face. She looked over at Scott and Miranda.

“It’s true. She has returned.”

ZEROBALL

ZeroBall is a sport played by either the reckless or the desperate, or both. Exclusive to the artificial-gravity environment of Neo City, it has become extremely popular by virtue of its propensity to severely injure its participants—sometimes fatally. Yet this does not deter the high numbers of citizens partaking in the sport, primarily because the prize money is so eye-watering—more than enough to entice the reckless and the desperate to risk a broken neck.

Like most spectator sports, it is a team effort that involves trying to get a ball across the opponent's line. In the case of ZeroBall, that line is simply a round hoop into which the ball must be placed in order to score. In a way, it is similar to basketball, but that's where the similarity ends, since this is not played on the ground but in midair, in zero-gee.

Neo City is a unique habitat within the solar system in that it is carved out of an asteroid. It has an internal diameter of over a half-kilometer, and because it spins around the central axis, this creates an artificial gravity on the inner rim similar to Earth.

However, with the help of a gas-powered thruster pack and enough elevation, a person could lift themselves off the ground, so to speak, then apply a directional force opposite to that of the spin, and they would be weightless. From there they could soar up and around the interior volume on nothing more than a puff of expelled gas.

In practice, though, people who want to experience these weightless acrobatics generally travel up to the central axis using one of the end cap elevators. This would drain their stored angular velocity and render them weightless. Then, all that is needed is for them to launch themselves into empty space and fly around using any form of low-powered thruster.

Yet they have to be careful not to fly too close to the ground, since they could be sideswiped by a structure such as the side of a building as it rotates with the spin of the habitat. This is because, with an outer rotational speed of one-point-three RPM, that

structure will hit them at over two hundred kilometers per hour—an impact of such force that few live to tell the tale.

Yet despite all the inherent dangers, this was a pastime that many people in Neo City engaged in simply for the pleasure—being careful to stick to the center of the habitat and not get too close to the edges. And, like all human pastimes, it wasn't long before it generated a slew of competitive sports. The most popular of these being ZeroBall.

Each team consists of five players, and the objective is to place a ball through a hoop at the end of the opposing team's half. The hoops are one-meter-diameter light projections, and the field length is a half-kilometer. The actual ball is made of a hard, polished metallic alloy, large enough that it cannot be gripped with just one hand. As a consequence of this design, players tend to hold it to their chest or tuck it under one arm.

The ball also has an autonomously controlled safety feature that prevents it from spiraling out of control and smashing into the inner rim of the habitat. This autonomy also allows for a random change of direction every now and again, just to mix things up. If, during a game, the ball is simply floating in free space, it may suddenly fly off in a new direction, sending the players scrambling to alter their flight vector to chase it down—usually to the whoops and cheers of the spectators.

To add a little more danger to the sport, as if it wasn't dangerous enough, a series of one-hundred-meter-tall poles telescope up from the floor of the habitat, spaced one hundred meters apart. These are semi-flexible and padded, so that being side-swiped by the top of one of these would not result in anything more damaging than some bruising. However, any player who has the misfortune to hit one would almost certainly be sent into an uncontrolled tumble. This is the greatest fear of any player—to be spinning around with no idea of up or down or direction of travel. A tumble can also occur when two players impact in a tussle to get hold of the ball. In fact, it is a strategy adopted by all players to destabilize and disorient their opponent.

But there was one important rule that had to be introduced early on in the game's development, and that was the *quid pro quo* rule. This meant that if a player was incapacitated for some reason, and needed to retire from the field, then a player from the opposing team also had to retire. This rule was introduced to prevent teams

trying to eliminate each other by simply sending their opponents crashing to the ground or forcing them to hit one of the poles. Such a game would have an unacceptably high fatality count, with the winner literally being the last person standing—or floating, in this case. Yet it was still a dangerous game, and fatal injuries were not uncommon.

Today was ZeroDay—the day of the final match of the tournament, when the two top teams would fight it out for the grand prize. A cash amount that would allow every player on the winning team to never have to worry about money again. Everything in Neo City came to a standstill on ZeroDay. Everybody who could stopped work, and a carnival atmosphere took over the entire habitat—with buildings and streets festooned with team colors as the build-up to the final reached fever pitch.

All citizens were expected to join in the festivities, and that even included Fredrick VanHeilding, much to his annoyance. It wasn't that he disliked the game or the carnival atmosphere—it was because he would have to show his face at a party organized by the governor of Neo City, Lui Wei, a high-ranking member of the ruling Xiang Zu family.

After beating a hasty retreat from the failed attempt at taking control of New World One, VanHeilding limped away and sought sanctuary at Neo City. This made him beholden to Lui Wei and the Xiang Zu family—and Fredrick did not like being beholden to anyone. By attending the party, he would be allowing Lui Wei an opportunity to belittle him, by making him acutely aware of his family's reliance on the support and generosity of Xiang Zu Corporation.

A sleek, private gyro gracefully touched down inside the VanHeilding compound in Neo City—a sizable chunk of real estate that the family had managed to carve out for themselves over many decades of involvement in the asteroid city-state. The gyro was a small, airborne craft of simple design, a cabin suspended beneath four sets of counter-rotating blades, one at each corner. Dispatched courtesy of Lui Wei, it arrived to pick up Fredrick and his entourage and bring them to the game. This would be one of the last flights of the day, before all aerial activity was suspended for the duration of the event.

The side door of the gyro swung up to reveal a luxurious

interior. Two Xiang Zu operatives, dressed in the understated elegance of the very rich, hopped out. One scanned the area while the other escorted Fredrick into the private cabin along with Sebastian VanHeilding, a distant cousin of Fredrick's—a midranking member of the family. The third member of Fredrick's entourage, a trusted bodyguard and node-runner who went by the name of César, also took up a seat in the gyro. The door closed with a hiss and the sleek machine powered up its quad rotors.

As the craft rose into the Neo City sky, beginning its short journey to Lui Wei's residence, Fredrick gazed out the window at the crowds gathered in the streets down below. Everywhere he looked was thronged with ordinary people in full party mode: drinking, singing, dancing, and generally having a good time.

"Looks like one heck of a party going on down there," said Sebastian, also gazing down at the revelers through a window on the opposite side of the cabin.

"Yes, their one day of joy in an otherwise mundane and turgid existence." He said this as if speaking to himself.

"You almost sound like you feel sorry for them." Sebastian turned his head away from the window.

Fredrick frowned. "Perhaps I do. Perhaps I feel sorry for their ignorance, their pursuit of the baser pleasures. That which gratifies the body rather than the mind."

This response seemed to silence Sebastian, since he did not reply and instead returned to gazing out the window at the crowd below.

The gyro slowed and came to a hover over the landing pad in the sprawling Lui Wei compound. It rotated gently and descended to a soft touchdown on one of the upper decks. The compound occupied a central position within Neo City and was built over several different levels, perfect as a ringside seat for the ZeroBall final.

Fredrick and Sebastian exited the craft and were ushered down a broad stairway onto a wide lido deck, populated with a generous scattering of the rich and beautiful of Neo City. Some gathered around the bars and tables, others draped themselves decoratively across sofas and recliners. All were abuzz with an excited anticipation of the forthcoming game.

But their path continued through this privileged throng of Neo City citizens and down a few short steps to a roped-off VIP deck—the prime location in all of Neo City to watch the day's events

unfold. The VanHeildings were shown to their seats, each an oversized circular sofa. They settled in, and refreshments were brought.

Fredrick cast a glance around at the other VIPs assembled here; most were members of the seven most powerful families in the solar system. He nodded polite greetings to those he knew.

“We have arrived in a nest of vipers,” Fredrick whispered over to Sebastian, who was busy adjusting his ample frame into a comfortable position on the sofa.

“Good view, though.” He glanced up at the game area above, then back at the party on the upper deck. “No sign of our esteemed host yet.”

Before Fredrick could answer, a blast of triumphant music reverberated around the game area, and with it all eyes turned to look up at them. Fredrick glanced back to see Lui Wei entering along with several others. Some were clearly bodyguards, and others merely fashion accessories. He strolled past the rows of sofas to the edge of the deck and waved to the throngs of people below. A loud cheer could be heard echoing around the habitat. After a moment or two of soaking up the adulation, Lui Wei turned away from the edge and made himself comfortable in the central seat, just an arm’s reach away from Fredrick.

“Glad you could make it, Fredrick.” He said this without turning his head. He was still waving and smiling at the crowd.

“How could I miss the final of the most renowned tournament in the entire solar system?”

“You flatter us. Our game is but a humble trial of zero-gravity skill.”

Before Fredrick could reply, a deafening cheer erupted from the crowd as players began entering the game area high above. They flew in from both ends of the of the giant habitat, five players on each side, waving to the crowd as they flew by. From Fredrick’s perspective, and all those who watched from around the rim of the habitat, the players seemed to spin slowly as they progressed toward each other. But in reality they were stationary; it was the habitat that spun around the players. Fredrick found himself a little awed by this phenomenon of physics, despite his overall disinterest in the game.

The players were dressed in slick, skintight bodysuits designed to afford minimal opportunity for an opponent to grab on to them.

Small gas thrusters were strapped to each forearm, allowing them to maneuver in free space. But gas reserves were restricted, requiring the player to be efficient and frugal in their use. One team wore all yellow, the other all green. They slowed to a floating stop, taking up positions prior to commencement of the game. A palpable wave of excitement rippled throughout the crowd, and all eyes again turned to Lui Wei. He stood up, walked to the edge, and raised a hand in the air. The crowd settled down to a murmur. High overhead, a shiny metallic sphere zoomed to a point in space equidistant from the two teams, then stopped and hovered there, motionless.

Lui Wei took a moment to survey the crowd, allowing the thrill of anticipation to build, his arm raised high above his head. "Let the game...begin." He shouted the last word, bringing his hand down in one swift movement at the same time. The crowd roared their approval as a player from each team broke off and made a beeline for the sphere. Wei sat down again and settled in.

Despite his natural cynicism, Fredrick VanHeilding found himself enthralled by the game as it progressed. It was physics as ballet, Newtonian mechanics as entertainment. He barely noticed the twenty minutes of play pass by before the first-quarter horn blew. Both teams had so far failed to score.

The noise from the crowd began to settle down as they took the opportunity to discuss the game so far and stock up on vitals prior to recommencement of battle. Lui Wei leaned over toward Fredrick. "Enjoying our humble sport?"

"I must admit, I find it quite captivating."

"Ahh...but they're only getting warmed up. Wait until the last quarter when they become more desperate." He cocked an eye over at Sebastian. "And what brings you to our asteroid city?"

"I've heard so much about this famous game of ZeroBall, and I was in the neighborhood, so to speak. So I decided on a whim to come and see it for myself." Sebastian's demeanor was jovial. He was clearly enjoying the game.

"In the neighborhood? How fortunate." Lui Wei glanced at Fredrick with a skeptical look, then back at Sebastian. "That's a very fine ship you have," he continued. "I don't think I've ever seen one quite like it."

Sebastian shifted in his seat, clearly proud that Lui Wei had noticed the splendor of his vessel. "It's the very latest from the

Cerellian Engineering Shipyards, designed to my own specification, and the fastest in the system.”

“Then you must meet our chief ship designer. I imagine you two would have much to talk about. He’ll be at the grand gala at the end of the tournament. You are coming, aren’t you?”

“Eh...I’m afraid not. We’ll be leaving tomorrow.”

“Ah...that’s unfortunate.” Wei remained silent for a moment, preferring to adjust the placement of his drink on the small table beside him.

He turned to Fredrick and leaned in close. “I heard a rumor,” he finally said, his voice low and serious. “A rumor that your wayward daughter and her entourage have left the relative safety of New World One, bound for Mars, I believe.” He turned and gave Fredrick a considered look. “Interesting development, don’t you think? A person might get tempted, thinking of them out there...all alone and isolated.”

So there it is, thought Fredrick. *This is what’s bothering him.* “I’ve heard that rumor too, and maybe that’s what they want a person to believe...that they’re all alone, ready to be picked off.”

“Ahh...you are the wily one, Fredrick. Always thinking of plots within plots.”

They stopped talking, since the second quarter was about to begin. It opened with a bang. Yellow were quicker off the mark and snagged the sphere first. A few deft passes later and the first score of the game was chalked up—the yellow fans roared their approval. Green was now under pressure, and so came out swinging. They were first to the sphere this time, and getting more aggressive. A deft turn and a well-timed kick by a green player sent one of the opposing team tumbling uncontrollably into the path of a rotating pole. The crowd held their breath, then let out a collective sigh as the player managed to correct course, missing the oncoming pole by a whisker.

Again, Fredrick became enthralled by this gear shift in the game, so much so that he almost put all thoughts of Wei’s inquisition out of his mind.

But as the second-quarter horn sounded, Wei continued, “As you know, Neo City will be at its closest point to New World One in less than three months.” He gave Fredrick another of his considered looks. “It wouldn’t be good to get distracted from our ultimate mission.”

By now, Fredrick was getting a little annoyed at the subtext of this conversation. Was Lui Wei really so emboldened as to presume to question VanHeilding family business? True, the Xiang Zu clan had invested heavily in the success of the first mission, and had also facilitated the rebuild of the two VanHeilding ships. But this did not give him the authority, in Fredrick's mind, to dictate what he should or should not do.

"Agreed," Fredrick finally replied with clenched teeth.

But Lui Wei persisted. "If the Perception has indeed departed for Mars, then surely that is one less thing to concern ourselves with?"

Fredrick carefully considered his response. On the one hand, he did not want to open up a fissure between the two families. But on the other, he did not like being lectured by this arrogant fop.

"These are family matters." He gave a nonchalant, dismissive gesture. "No need for you to concern yourself with them."

"But of course. Please forgive my intrusion." Wei gave an apologetic smile. "I'm merely saying that it is never good to get sidestepped into adventures whose objectives many would consider a distraction."

Fredrick remain silent, and seriously considered getting up and leaving the game. But that was probably not a good idea. So he simply ignored Lui Wei's taunts. Fortunately, the third quarter of the game was about to begin.

It opened with the score still even at five points each. But the lure of the prize money must have been on the players' minds during recess, since both teams found yet another gear. Straight out of the gate, the play was faster and even more aggressive this time around.

Within the first minute of play commencing, a green player had been forced into the path of an oncoming pole and looked to be knocked unconscious with the impact. She bounced off in an uncontrolled tumble, heading toward the inner rim. The crowd rose to their feet in anticipation of a fatal smash, but the player managed to come to, regain control, and made her way back to the play area. There was a hint of disappointment from the crowd at being denied this drama.

Yet, the player had clearly been injured and seemed to have difficulty getting oriented. Yellow's blood was now up, and in the intervening moment had managed to score another point, putting

them in the lead. But green were not giving up just yet, and a battle royale played out for the remaining quarter. Nevertheless, it ended 6-5 to yellow.

This only added to Fredrick's irritation as both he and Sebastian, at Lui Wei's request, had taken a flutter on the game, picking green to win. Whereas he, of course, had chosen yellow.

"Looks like your team is struggling, Fredrick."

"It's not over yet," he snapped back.

"True, there's still plenty to fight for." He paused for a beat, then leaned in closer to Fredrick and lowered his voice. "Concerning our earlier conversation, it would be remiss of me if I did not inform you that some of the lesser families invested in our...endeavor are getting a little anxious."

Fredrick replied with a quick wave of his hand as if swatting a fly. "But we both know they are fools. I for one see nothing but success in securing New World One. To my mind it is inevitable."

"My own sentiments exactly," said Lui Wei. "And it would seem that your estranged family think likewise by beating a hasty exit before they are trapped." Wei considered his next words for a moment. "But what's concerning the other families is why you failed the first time, considering that the QI on Ceres was destroyed."

Fredrick returned a glare. "I'm not in the mood right now to explain what happened all over again."

"No, of course not. We're here to enjoy ourselves." Wei paused for a beat. "But I've been hearing some...wild stories, rumors of a *ghost in the machine*. Utter nonsense, I imagine, but they do persist."

"It's complete drivel. I can't imagine where you heard that," Fredrick returned.

"Oh, people talk. Especially in bars and clubs. Your node-runners are still only human—they like to socialize just like everyone else. They drink, they let their hair down, they talk."

"Well, it's absurd."

"I'm sure it is. But what's intriguing is that the name Luca has been mentioned, more than once. And spoken of in hushed, reverent tones—so I've been told. This is your granddaughter, I believe. What do you make of that?"

After the failure to capture New World One, Fredrick had kept quiet about the power that Luca wielded. For one, would anyone really believe that a single person could undermine the combined

processing power of a well-trained cohort of node-runners? Fredrick gave another dismissive gesture. "Excuses, excuses. They simply overplayed their hand taking out the QI and left themselves with insufficient resources to finish the job. That's not going to happen again."

But Fredrick's final worlds were drowned out by the roar of the crowd as the players took their positions for the final quarter of the game.

The final chapter in this aerial battle opened with a frenzied rush for the sphere, with several players from both sides making a dash for possession. Their combined efforts resulted in a ruck of bodies spinning and tumbling as each player fought for control. This seemed to please the crowd to no end, as they cheered and hooted their approval.

One body eventually escaped from the ruck with the sphere and made a beeline for the yellow end. The remaining players tussled with each other, green trying to break free while yellow tried to hold them back. But the player with possession was not having it all his own way. An opponent was hot on his heels and gaining.

The crowd cheered on the chase, applauding and groaning in equal measure as their team won or lost control of the sphere. The game had become a messy affair, with both sides willing to physically block or attack their opponents with a sense of wild abandon. It was the last quarter and caution had been discarded. Every player was now all in.

Sebastian had totally succumbed to the emotional rollercoaster of the game, cheering like the best of them when green had possession, booing when they lost it. Even Fredrick could not help himself when green finally evened the score. He rose from his seat, clapping and cheering without realizing it.

Lui Wei called over to him when he finally sat back down.

"It's all to play for now, the next blow will win the game and take the prize. But does your team have what it takes, Fredrick? Or will they be like your node-runners and fail at the last hurdle?"

The answer came in the last seconds as a green player closed in on the hoop, poised to take the winning point, only to run out of gas for their thrusters. With no way to correct course, they shot too soon and missed.

With one player now out of commission, the yellow team

grabbed their chance, and in three swift passes had the sphere back at the opposite end and into the hoop, just as the final horn sounded.

Sebastian threw his hands up in the air in despair, while Fredrick seethed. Wei leaned over to commiserate. “Bad luck, old boy. Seems your team didn’t leave enough in the tank to finish the job.”

SHIPPING OUT

Regardless of Lui Wei's taunting of Fredrick at the ZeroBall final, he had been growing increasingly frustrated just knowing that Luca, along with the entire former crew of the science vessel Hermes, were out there, just waiting to be taken. Yet he was not in a position to do anything about it. All his resources were dedicated to the renewed assault on New World One, and much as he hated to admit it, Lui Wei was right: this was not the time to get distracted. If he were to divert one of his ships now and go after them, it would not go down well with the other families. In reality, he would just be giving them an opportunity to undermine VanHeilding's grip on power.

Already, Xiang Zu Corporations were making hay out in the asteroid belt, taking over outposts, eliminating competitors, and generally causing chaos. Once the full complement of ships arrived in a few months, they would surely have total control of all the Belt's resources. Provided, of course, that VanHeilding took control of the habitat.

Yet it was not all bad news, either. Particularly since his treacherous daughter, Miranda, had decided to abandon New World One and take Luca to Mars. So with Luca out of the way, he was virtually guaranteed success in taking control of the habitat. Yet somewhere in the back of his mind, he couldn't help thinking that it could all be just a ruse by Miranda. A trick to make him believe they had left, only for his new armada to face the power of Luca's extraordinary node-running abilities once again. There was no way that he could risk walking into a trap like that. Xiang Zu were already waiting in the long grass, ready to pounce given any opportunity. If Fredrick failed to take control of New World One again, he would give them that excuse. It would be the beginning of the end for the family.

Nonetheless, some of the stories coming out of New World One were that Luca was in a coma, with little or no sign of recovery. But again, this could simply be a bogus story put out there just to set

him up. What Fredrick really needed was clarity. He needed to know precisely where Luca was, and her true mental state. Was she actually on the Perception like he was supposed to believe, or lying in wait on the habitat, or was she somewhere else entirely?

All this uncertainty weighed heavily on Fredrick's mind as he made his way on a personal shuttle out to Sebastian VanHeilding's fancy-assed ship, Daedalus, which was still parked in close proximity to Neo City. He would be leaving soon to continue his so-called *grand tour* of the solar system, heading to Mars for the Festival of Lights. This presented Fredrick with an opportunity—that is, if he could trust Sebastian not to screw it up.

The ship, an M3-class luxury interplanetary transport built by Cerellian Engineering Shipyards, was indeed a thing of beauty. Sleek, elegant, almost organic, with a purposeful-looking engine array. Yet it was small and lacked a gravity ring—a rotating torus that provided the occupants with simulated gravity. However, this was not some flaw in its design, but a feature that allowed the ship to land on any body within the solar system with a gravity well less than one-third that of Earth's. This meant it could land on Mars, hence the M3 classification. It was also fast, possibly one of the fastest in the entire solar system—as Sebastian VanHeilding so often crowed about to anyone who would listen.

The shuttle slowed to a halt directly over a docking port on the ship's topside, then rotated slightly to orient itself for correct alignment. Both shuttle and ship were now operating autonomously, making all the micro-adjustments needed to allow the umbilical to telescope up from the docking and make a secure connection. Alerts sounded in the cockpit, and the pilot called back to Fredrick, "Docking complete, sir. Opening the hatch now."

As Fredrick floated over to the hatch, he considered how much he hated zero-gee; it was unnatural and disorienting. He could not understand how anyone would spend an entire journey in deep space with absolutely no gravity—the concept was beyond him. Yet it seemed that the zero-gee experience was becoming more fashionable these days. With faster engines and shortened transfer times, it was now the favored mode of travel for a new generation seeking out the "real" space-travel experience.

The hatch door swung open, and after some help from the pilot, Fredrick managed to float through into the ship. Sebastian was

waiting for him on the other side, smiling like a child at a fairground, no doubt delighted at the opportunity to show off his elegant ship.

“Fredrick, so glad you decided to come for the guided tour.” Sebastian extended a welcoming arm.

“I’m not here to get a tour of your goddamn ship.”

Sebastian’s face morphed into one of near heartbreak.

“I only came here so we could have a discussion in private, away from the snooping of Lui Wei and Xiang Zu.”

Sebastian regained some composure and shook his head. “You don’t want to see the ship?”

Fredrick replied by way of an angry glare.

“I see,” said Sebastian. “Very well, follow me to the bridge. We can talk there.”

As they floated through the ship en route to the bridge, Fredrick was surprised by how spacious it was. From the outside it seemed small, but perhaps that was just a trick of design. Yet now that he was moving along its corridors, he sensed it could carry at least fifty or more people in comfort, as well as a reasonable complement of rovers and drones. He found himself becoming more impressed with the craft as he progressed—not that he would let Sebastian know this. It would only inflate his already overblown ego even more.

The bridge also had an odd design, one Fredrick had never seen before. But as he cast his eyes around the space, he could see that since this ship could land on a planet, it needed to be able to accommodate this. So, unlike ships that spent all their time in space, where up/down had no meaning, this had a very definite up-and-down orientation. Yet it also had a multitude of grips and handles to assist moving in zero-gee.

He moved himself onto a seat and strapped in so that he would not have to hold on to something to keep himself oriented. Sebastian, on the other hand, preferred to simply float with one hand holding the edge of the central holo-table.

Fredrick settled himself in and gave his distant cousin a long, cold stare. “So why are you really here, Sebastian? And don’t give me that bullshit about wanting to see the famous game of ZeroBall.”

“What do you mean?” He feigned umbrage. “Isn’t ZeroBall a good enough reason?”

“I said don’t bullshit me.” Fredrick glared at him.

Sebastian remained silent for a moment, looking at something on the holo-table. "The family thought you could do with some... moral support, now that we need to kowtow to Xiang Zu." He looked around to face Fredrick, returning his glare.

Fredrick pursed his lips and sighed. "So you were sent here to spy on me, report back on my state of mind, I suppose?"

"No, nothing as vulgar as that. But they are...how shall I put it...concerned that the foundations of our power are being mortgaged."

"They seek to undermine my authority?"

"There are rumblings of discontent. Factions are forming, some who think the quest to acquire New World One is a game where the stakes are simply too high."

"And you, where do you stand?"

Sebastian gave a broad smile. "Fortune favors the bold."

Fredrick considered this response for a moment. It could have several meanings, not least Sebastian's *bold* desire to rise up the family ranks. But that was common knowledge; Sebastian didn't try to hide his ambition, which was partly why Fredrick put up with him. At least he knew where he stood.

"Fortune may well favor the bold, as you put it, Sebastian. But it can also get you killed." Fredrick leaned in a little and nodded. "You would do well to remember that."

Sebastian glanced down at the holo-table again, gathering his thoughts. "So let me ask you the same question then, Fredrick. Why are you here...on my ship? What is it you want to discuss?"

It was now Fredrick's turn to pause and gather his thoughts as he contemplated his proposal. It was risky. Could he trust Sebastian to pull this off without his ego and ambition getting in the way? But as he ran through all the possible permutations in his mind, Sebastian and his fancy ship could be utilized for a far greater purpose than simply pursuing a decadent lifestyle.

"I'm offering you a chance to do your duty for the family. To do something that will allow you to rise up through the ranks. Perhaps even gain a seat at the high table."

Sebastian smiled, his eyes widened, and he gave an expansive gesture with his free hand. "I'm all ears."

Fredrick unstrapped himself from the seat and floated over to the holo-table. After a moment familiarizing himself with its operation, he brought up a 3D rendering of the local solar system, a

standard navigation map. He pointed to a line that scribed itself through open space. "This is the estimated flight path of the Perception, en route to Mars, as you can see here." He pointed at the line. "Do you think this ship can intercept it?"

"So you're going after Luca. I knew it."

"No, I'm not going after her, not yet. I just need to establish if she's actually on this ship. So can you intercept it or not?"

Sebastian entered some data into the navigation chart and a new line appeared, emanating from Neo City. "Yes, it seems we can." He glanced at Fredrick with a broad smile.

"Good, very good." He gave Sebastian a careful look. "Understand that establishing Luca's presence on that ship is critical to our planned takeover of New World One. All indications suggest that she is on it, but that may just be a ruse, something they want us to believe. It may be that, in reality, she's lying in wait for us at New World One, and that would be a challenging situation, to say the least."

Sebastian nodded. "I understand. But even if we intercept the Perception, how will we know if she is on board?"

"I'm giving you one of my top node-runners, César Castello. You need to get your ship close enough so that he can do a probe of the Perception. Remember, this was once a VanHeilding ship before Miranda stole it, so it should be possible."

Sebastian gestured toward a side bay on the bridge, with two node-runner terminals. "I already have two of my own, both at the top of their game. Why do I need another?"

"You have no idea who you're dealing with here, Sebastian. If Luca is really on that ship, and she's even half-functioning, any contact with her by an inexperienced node-runner would just end in potential brain death. Trust me, no matter how highly you think of your people, they are no match for her. Let César initiate the probe. Your people can back him up under his direction."

Sebastian looked at Fredrick with wide eyes. "So the rumors are true, then. She is this *ghost in the machine* that all the node-runners fear?"

Fredrick gave his distant cousin a considered look. "What I'm about to tell you, Sebastian, is above your current rank. But since you are accepting this mission, I feel it's only right that you should know the truth. Do I have your word that you will keep what I'm about to tell you a closely guarded secret?"

“Of course. You have my word.”

“Very well. As you probably know, Luca’s my granddaughter. One of hundreds that I have, all of whom are the product of a generational experiment in quantum biology. You see, the family have been working for a very long time to create an enhanced node-runner. One who can utilize quantum effects and operate more like a QI. However, all our efforts came to naught, except for Luca. The irony in all of this is that her inception was natural, as opposed to all the others, which were lab-grown.”

“So...would I be right in assuming that she was on New World One when we attacked, but nobody realized her abilities...until she entered the habitat’s data-stream?”

Fredrick was mildly impressed with Sebastian’s analysis. Perhaps there was more to him than met the eye. Maybe this *indolent fop* persona of his was all just an act, in which case Fredrick may do well to keep him close.

“You are correct. But I don’t think she knew, either, so we were all caught off-guard—we won’t make that mistake again. That said, if the intelligence we’ve been receiving is correct, she was greatly weakened by the encounter and is believed to be in a coma. But that too could be just a bullshit story. So it’s critical that you find out if she’s really on that ship, and not setting up an ambush on New World One.”

Sebastian nodded. “Understood.”

“And listen”—Fredrick jabbed an index finger at him—“if she does prove to be on that ship, don’t get any ideas above your rank. Do not, under any circumstances, try and take her on. You will almost certainly fail. Is that clear?”

Sebastian seemed a little hesitant in his response. “But what if it turns out she really is in a coma, as they say she is? Surely it would be an opportunity not to be missed, to capture her while she’s exposed and isolated in deep space?”

“I appreciate how tempting that scenario might be, and believe me, capturing her is the ultimate objective. But now is not the time, and you do not have the resources to take on the Perception. Don’t forget, Miranda turned it into a den of mercenaries—it’s a veritable warship. It’s well armed and would cut you to shreds. So stay well away. All I need is for you to establish if Luca is on it. That way, we can proceed with the invasion of New World One with confidence. Once that’s achieved, then we can develop a more comprehensive

plan to acquire Luca.”

Again, Sebastian hesitated before replying. “Very well. We’ll depart in a few hours, as soon as the ship is finished with the resupply.”

Fredrick nodded and moved away from the holo-table, heading for the exit. He turned to look back at the doorway. “Don’t let me down on this mission, Sebastian. And more importantly, don’t let the family down. This is your chance to prove that you’re more than just the decadent playboy you let people believe you are.”

AUXILIARY COMMAND

Luca sat cross-legged on a packing crate, one of a great many that now occupied the old swimming pool on the interplanetary ship *Perception*. She remembered the pool from her early childhood—how it used to be in all its grandeur. But it had fallen into disuse as the ship became home to a crew of mercenaries who had no use for such luxuries. It was now part storeroom, part workshop, part boneyard. The crates and supplies were needed to balance the weight on the torus, according to Cyrus, so the old pool was now just a storage bunker.

Yet Luca still liked this place. It was the largest open space on the ship, and it had a gloriously wide window where she could look out at the universe beyond. She sat and gazed out at the stars, trying to imagine that she could see Mars, although this was impossible since they were still much too far away.

They had left New World One twenty-nine days ago and spent the first three days burning hard, trying to shake any ships that might try and follow them, taking heavy-gee in the process. They kept this up intermittently for a further fifteen days until everyone was utterly exhausted and simply couldn't take any more.

Nevertheless, two ships still tracked them, not far behind. Quite what these ships hoped to achieve was questionable since the *Perception* had considerable firepower on board, more than enough to deal with scavengers and bounty hunters. Miranda reckoned that they were just opportunists, hoping that something might happen to the ship, a technical failure or meteorite strike. Then they would pounce. Yet no one seemed that concerned about these pursuers.

Of more concern was Neo City. Soon they would be at their closest point in space to the asteroid enclave as it made its orbital journey closer to the Belt region of space. This was where VanHeilding had retreated to, and if the family were going to make a move on them, then it would more likely be coming from Neo City, and soon. So for the last four days, they had all been resting up in anticipation of a further heavy burn, the longest of the

journey so far, which should keep them ahead of any opportunists from Neo City who had aspirations of catching them.

Nobody was looking forward to it, least of all Luca, who had still not regained her full strength after her seven-month-long coma. She lay down flat on her back on the packing crate, rested her head on her hands, and contemplated the ceiling. She tried to imagine herself back in the pool in the canyon, cool and languid, timeless and safe.

But her daydream was interrupted by the sound of the doors to the pool room opening, followed by the sound of short, skipping footsteps. She recognized them as belonging to Cyrus.

He did not see her, as she had the more elevated position. She tapped the neural lace at the base of her skull and activated it. She could now see the camera feed from her drone, Fly, which had perched itself high up on one of the ducts that ran along the ceiling of the pool room.

Cyrus was checking labels on a row of packing crates, looking for something, muttering to himself as he went. One of the ship's service droids followed as he moved along the rows. Eventually, he arrived at a point just below Luca.

She lifted herself up on one elbow and looked down at him. "Hi, Cyrus, what you up to?"

He jumped back, startled. "Jeez, Luca. Don't do that. You scared the crap out of me."

"Oops, sorry." She sat up, legs dangling over the edge of the crate.

"Eh...I'm trying to find a spare part. It's supposed to be here somewhere."

"What for? Something break? Hope it's not important."

"Ahh...this entire ship is falling apart." He scanned another label, then looked up again at Luca. "Don't worry, nothing major. It's just I might be able to get us a shade more power by replacing some of the control boards for the starboard containment vessel."

"I see. It wouldn't be good if we had a plasma containment failure during the next heavy burn."

Cyrus moved on to the next packing crate. "That almost never happens these days. Mostly this type of ship drive just loses oomph over time."

"You worried about what could start chasing us down from the Neo City asteroid?"

Cyrus glanced up at Luca and gave her a considered look, although it was hard to tell since he permanently wore an ocular visor. "I'd be lying if I said I wasn't." He spun his head around to look at the droid, who had been scanning along a different row of crates. "Ahh...I think we've found one." He moved over the droid and scanned the label. "Bingo."

Luca clambered down from her perch atop the crates and came over. "Can I help? I'm pretty good with tools. I think people forget I'm a technologist. It's what I did before...well, you know."

"Before your grandfather wanted to turn you into stem cells?"

Luca smiled. "Yeah, exactly."

"Sure, I could use a hand."

The droid extracted the crate and lowered it to the ground.

Cyrus began opening it, but paused as Fly swooped down from its perch and settled on Luca's shoulder. He glanced at it with fascination. "That's quite a toy you've got there, Luca."

"Present from Athena. It took me a while to get used to it." She gestured toward the base of her skull. "The whole neural-lace thing."

Cyrus nodded. "Well you're a grandmaster now, after all that node-runner stuff back on the New World."

Luca lowered her head and studied the floor. "Bad business, that. I can still hear the white noise of all those dying minds. It's a horror I carry with me." She looked back up at Cyrus, who had stopped what he was doing, focusing instead on what Luca was saying. "I don't know why I'm telling you this, Cyrus. But...I can't do it anymore, not without freaking out. I tried...with the ship's AI, Max. But it was all too much for me. Maybe I'm burned out. Interfacing with Fly is all I can manage."

Cyrus considered this for a moment, and Luca got the feeling that she had just dumped a load of stuff on him that he wasn't quite expecting. He looked away and started fiddling with something inside the packing crate. "Once we get into Mars space, you'll be safe, Luca. You won't have to worry about battling demons in the network."

Luca did not share Cyrus's optimistic outlook, but she let it ride. There was nothing to be gained by dragging the engineer down into her bleak worldview.

"You know, I think you'll really like Mars," Cyrus offered with a noticeable cheeriness. "It's a beautiful place, especially Jezero—and

quite old. Some parts are over two hundred and fifty years old, antique almost. The first thing you should do is go and visit the old city, especially the original biodome. You'll be amazed at how rudimentary life support was back then."

Luca was tempted to reply, *If we manage to get there alive*, but Cyrus's boyish enthusiasm was having a calming effect on her, pushing back the dark clouds of her fatalism. "Yes, I've always wanted to see it. I've heard so many stories from Steph over the years."

Cyrus raised a hand to his temple—he was receiving an internal comms. "Yeah, what is it?" He glanced over at Luca and mouthed the name *Scott*. "When? Okay...I'm in the storeroom looking for those parts we discussed... Yeah, she's here beside me. Okay, keep me posted." He gave Luca a concerned look. "We've got some more company. A new blip just popped up. A ship heading out from Neo City direction."

"VanHeilding Corporation?"

"Possibly. It's a small personal transport. Miranda thinks it's not a threat."

Luca shook her head. "It never ends, does it?"

"Ahhh, it's no big deal. We're nearly in Mars space. Just ten more days and we're home free."

Luca was not convinced, but she nodded back anyway.

"Come on, let's get these parts installed." He signaled to the maintenance droid to lift the crate and follow.

It took them a while to work their way along the torus to an elevator that brought them to the central spine of the ship, and weightlessness. They then moved along a maintenance tunnel to a control room just forward of the main reactor. They spoke very little, and Luca got the feeling that Cyrus was troubled. Perhaps she had dumped too much on him, or maybe there was more to the ship that was now pursuing them out of Neo City.

"So what's the plan?" she asked as the droid secured the crate to a rail in the control room so that it wouldn't float away.

Cyrus activated a holo-screen and brought up a series of schematics. "This ship has several fusion reactors, and all of them are running at around nine percent below optimal." He brought up a 3D diagram on the holo-screen. "They're just old, and Miranda seems to have spent most of her time and energy fitting this ship

with weapons rather than the boring job of maintenance.” He glanced at Luca with a grin.

“So we’re going to shut down this one here, which supplies power for one of the main engines, swap out the electromagnet control circuitry, and boot it up again. It should give us a few extra joules of energy.”

“You think we’re going to need it? I mean with all these ships following us?”

“Ahhh...to be fair to your mother, I think the weapons are more useful in this scenario. I’m just doing this to...keep myself busy.”

They were silent for a time, both studying the 3D projection as it exploded out to detail each component.

“I’m sorry I got you into all this mess,” Luca finally said.

The engineer glanced at her, a little confused.

“I mean, you had to leave New World One, leave the business you had built up, leave your life behind.”

He let out a laugh. “Ha...don’t let that worry you, Luca. I sold my business for a handsome profit. I’m a rich man, so don’t go feeling sorry for me. Besides, the stress of it was killing me. I’m not cut out to be a leader. I leave all that to the likes of Scott and Miranda. No, I’m much happier tinkering away with this sort of stuff.” He gestured at the schematic.

Luca smiled. “Then you’re a bit like me. Happiest when I’ve got my nose stuck in a machine.”

He gave her a considered look. “No, Luca. You are much, much more than me. And way beyond my humble capabilities. You can operate on a completely different level to anyone else in the solar system...except, maybe, for one other.”

Luca perked up at this revelation from Cyrus. “There’s another like me?”

“Yes, kind of. And he lives on Mars.”

“Who?”

“Xenon Hybrid. He’s an ancient individual, reputed to be over two hundred years old. He was their president a few times.” Cyrus glanced away from the schematic and gave Luca a curious look. “I’m surprised you haven’t heard of him. He’s a national treasure on the Red Planet.”

Luca searched her memory, and yes, she had heard of him before. But her perceptions were that he was more of an eccentric oddity rather than being in any way similar to herself. Perhaps

Cyrus was just trying to make her feel...less of an oddball. If so, he could have picked a better person.

“He’s that crazy guy—writes poetry and philosophy, goes wandering around the planet?”

“The very same.”

Luca gave a dismissive grunt. “Forgive me, but I can’t see the similarities, Cyrus.”

He gave her a grin. “Ah...then help me get these components swapped out, and I shall enlighten you.”

A short while later, they were both ensconced in one of the auxiliary control rooms along with the maintenance droid and Fly. The small drone had been Luca’s constant companion ever since she’d woken up on New World One. And for the first week or so, it had been the only thing she talked to—preferring the internal dialogue of her mind to the physical effort of communicating verbally. But in due course, she had coaxed herself out of mental isolation and back to interacting with humans.

Nevertheless, she found the maternal hovering of both Miranda and, to a lesser extent, Dr. Rayman to be a little irritating, even patronizing at times. As for Scott, he seemed to regard her simply as *fixed*—now that she was awake again. Cyrus, on the other hand, intrigued her. And he was easy to talk to.

“So what’s the plan?” she asked as she scanned the control room. It was small, utilitarian, and densely packed with equipment for monitoring the ship’s functions. It was not a place she was familiar with, having spent most of her time on board the Perception in the comfort of the rotating torus.

Cyrus put a finger to his lips, inferring that Luca should keep silent.

She replied with a quizzical look. *What’s he up to?* she wondered.

He floated over to a systems rack, dialed in some commands, and a sleek holo-screen slid out, presenting an interface for the ship’s systems. He proceeded to cycle through a series of schematics, entering commands as he went. Finally, he looked back at Luca. “Okay, now we can talk.” He gestured vaguely at the room. “Max can’t snoop on us in here.”

It took Luca a moment to digest this seemingly radical move. Did he not trust AI? “What’s the problem with Max?” Luca said in a hushed tone, almost a whisper.

“Nothing. It’s operating impeccably. It’s just that this ship, as you know, was designed to be fully autonomous, which is why there’s no bridge as such. Now that’s all fine and dandy if you’re just swanning through interplanetary space. But not if you’re being chased down by a couple of bogies.” He paused for a moment, considering his next words. “Especially if one of those bogies might have a few node-runners on board.” He glanced back up at Luca.

“Node-runners?” Luca had never even considered this possibility. “You think they’ll try and hack into the ship—into Max?”

Cyrus nodded. “Wouldn’t you? We are talking about a possible VanHeilding ship, after all.”

Luca shook her head. “It never ends, does it?”

“It will, Luca. We just need to get to Mars is all.” He turned and pointed to a long bank of auxiliary control systems. “Fortunately, we can operate the entire ship from here—without the AI.”

He floated along the corridor between the system racks and pointed again. “This section here monitors the AI core. So what we’re going to do is set up a break. A way to disconnect the AI from the ship’s primary functions: power, life support, engines. Then if Max starts acting a little screwy, we can pull the plug on it.”

Luca could see the sense in this, even if she didn’t quite share Cyrus’s faith in the sanctuary of Mars. “Do the others know of this plan of yours?”

“Eh...really it’s Scott’s plan. Miranda thinks we can just blow them to bits with a few well-placed plasma blasts. But both myself and Scott would like to have a plan B.”

“And Steph?”

“She thinks it wouldn’t be a good idea to...eh, rely on you... doing your thing.”

“She’s right. I don’t think I could face off against any more runners without... you know, ending up in a coma again.”

“Well, you won’t have to. So come on, let’s get to work on this.” He floated over to the crate that the maintenance droid had brought along and began to open it. At the same time, Luca moved Fly over to where they were working so that she could get a better view. This got Cyrus’s attention, and he studied the drone for a moment. “Say, Luca, what sort of range do you have with that thing?”

“I really don’t know, why?”

“If it was in here, would you be able to control it from back on

the torus?”

“Yes, no problem.”

Cyrus smiled at her. “Excellent. I think we’ve just figured out our remote trigger.”

SCRATCHING THE ITCH

Even though the Perception had no bridge, as typically found on most ships, it did have a library with an impressive array of systems for organizing and displaying data. Miranda had originally utilized this section of the ship as a kind of proto-bridge, and over the years it had morphed into the main operation room for the ship.

It currently had just one occupant, Scott McNabb, who was studying a navigation chart that blossomed out over the central holo-table, his attention focused on a blip that had recently materialized. The blip was still some distance away, at the very edge of the Perception's sensors. But it was moving with incredible speed and, according to the ship's AI, Max, if it maintained its current vector it would intercept the Perception in four days.

The doors to the operations room swished open, and Scott glanced around to see Cyrus and Luca walk in. He nodded. "How did you get on with that...eh, maintenance job?"

"All sorted. Ready to rock." Cyrus gave a thumbs-up.

They came over to the holo-table, both eager to know what progress the blip was making.

"Moving fast," Cyrus commented. "That's one very fancy ship." He sighed, then glanced around. "Where's Miranda and Steph?"

"Miranda's gone for some shuteye. Steph's... Actually, I've no idea where she is," said Scott.

"No matter." He sighed again, but this time it was more of a yawn. "Nothing much is going to happen for quite a while. So I'm going grab some rest. Catch you later." He turned and walked out, leaving Scott and Luca still studying the navigation chart on the holo-table.

"Is that Mars?" Luca poked a finger at a point near the edge of the chart.

"Yeah. We're almost there, not too long now." Scott nodded.

"Cyrus was telling me about some crazy old guy who lives there called Xenon. Do you know anything about him?"

Scott gave her a curious look. "Not a whole lot. I know he's a bit

strange—ancient, they say. Actually, myself and Cyrus met him once, back on Europa, long time ago.”

“You met him? What’s he like?”

“To be honest, I can’t really remember, other than he was... otherworldly. That’s about the best description I can give you.” He glanced over at her. “So what’s got you so interested in this guy?”

“Eh, no reason. He seems like...an enigma. I suppose I’m just curious.”

“Steph’s probably the best person to talk to. She’s pretty knowledgeable about Mars and its history.”

Luca nodded. “Max, where’s Dr. Rayman?”

“She is in the main recreational area eating a rehydrated bowl of Szechuan tofu balls,” replied the disembodied voice of the AI.

“Thanks.” Luca turned and headed out of the operations room. As she did, Fly buzzed over from its perch at the edge of the holotable and landed neatly on her shoulder.

Steph pushed her empty bowl aside and considered Luca’s sudden interest in the enigma that was Xenon Hybrid.

“So what’s put this into your head?” she said, wiping her mouth with a napkin.

“Cyrus. He said we were alike, but I couldn’t quite figure out what he meant by that.”

Steph leaned back in her chair and folded her arms. “I think what he means is that you are both products of genetic engineering experiments. But what Cyrus probably doesn’t realize is that both you and Xenon are cut from the same cloth.”

“Are you saying we’re the same?” Luca felt a twinge of excitement at the thought that there might be another person in the system who understood how she felt.

“No, I’m not saying that. Xenon is very different, genetically one of a kind. But there is probably a little bit of him in you.” She leaned forward, placing her elbows on the table. “It may come as a surprise to you, but the big breakthroughs in genetic engineering did not originate on Earth, but on Mars.”

She leaned back in her seat again. “You see, back in the early days, the first colony on Mars was funded by genetic research, the type that was banned on Earth—human research. The primary focus was on longevity, cheating death. And they were very successful. This led to human cloning, and eventually to engineering a

completely new strain of human—Homo ares.”

“Xenon?”

“Exactly. However, all this came at a price. The science was problematic, with significant side effects that hadn’t yet been ironed out. Long story short, once this clandestine research was discovered it was deemed too dangerous, and so it was completely destroyed and all data erased.”

“So, Xenon is the last of his kind?”

“He is. But not all the research was lost. Some made its way back to Earth and into the hands of just one family.”

Luca’s eyes widened. “The VanHeilding Corporation.”

Steph nodded. “At that time, they were a minor family dabbling in bioengineering. But over the decades, armed with this new technology, they began to release major scientific breakthroughs in combating aging in humans. They then developed patented procedures, exclusive to the VanHeilding Corporation, giving them fabulous wealth in the process.”

She leaned in again. “But here’s the thing, and why Cyrus might be more right about the connection between you and Xenon than he realizes. Back at the institute on Earth, where we were...monitoring you, we began to notice there were similarities between your DNA and the samples we had of Xenon’s. Leading us to believe that the VanHeilding Corporation had more of that old research from Mars than anyone had realized.”

“So he really is like me?”

“I don’t exactly know, Luca. There are similarities for sure, but how much? Who knows.”

“I’ve got to meet him...as soon as we land.”

“Well, just remember he’s very, very old, and frail by all accounts. He’s also a national treasure on Mars, so it’s not going to be as simple as knocking on his door.”

“I’ll find a way.”

“Just keep in mind that there have been a lot of myths built up around him. He may disappoint.”

“What sort of myths?”

“Oh, the one where he and all the other clones at that time were supposedly grown in bio-tanks.”

Luca laughed. “Ha, that’s impossible— isn’t it?”

“Totally. Then there’s the one where he’s supposed to be telepathic.”

“Well, that’s definitely nonsense.”

“Anyway, all I’m saying is, don’t be disappointed if you discover that he’s not all that the stories make him out to be.”

“I understand.” Luca nodded. But her mind was made up. As soon as they got to Mars, she would do whatever it took to talk with this strange biological relic. Here was the only other person in the entire system that might understand her.

“You’re doing that a lot lately.” Steph gestured at her.

“Doing what?” Luca looked puzzled.

“Scratching the back of your head. Is that neural lace irritating you?”

It was, and Luca had been trying to resist the desire just to rip it off her head. “It’s very itchy.”

“Well, don’t go trying to pull it out. The filaments have embedded themselves in your scalp, so you’ll only make it worse if you do that. We’ll see what can be done about it when we get to Mars.”

Luca nodded, and resisted the urge to scratch it again.

PROBE

For the next three days, the crew watched anxiously as the Neo City ship closed the gap between them with extraordinary speed. Unsurprisingly, all attempts to hail the craft were met with silence. But as it drew nearer and the Perception's sensors acquired more detail, Max identified it as an M3-class luxury interplanetary transport. Only seven of these existed, all privately owned by extremely wealthy individuals from the top families, one of which was Sebastian VanHeilding.

Miranda relaxed somewhat on hearing this. Even if this ship was the one owned by Sebastian, he was generally regarded within the family as being a useless pleasure-seeker. Not someone with the wit or capability to take on a well-armed ship such as the Perception. In short, she did not regard him as a threat. And her assessment seemed to play out as, over the next fourteen hours, the ship began to slow down and change vector. Max calculated it would come close but remain outside weapons range. Miranda, as well as the rest of the crew, started to breathe a little easier.

Until the attack came.

They were all gathered in the operations room when everything that wasn't screwed down started sliding across the floor. Before Luca had even time to register this phenomenon, she found herself tumbling across the room and slamming up against the side wall. The ship, for no explicable reason, had suddenly powered up its engines and started accelerating, rapidly increasing thrust. Luca felt the gee-forces building on her body; she was finding it difficult to move.

"Max," Miranda shouted out. "Max, what the hell? What are you doing? Kill the engines. Kill them now."

But there was no reply. Max was silent.

Scott, meanwhile, had managed to wedge his back against the pedestal of the holo-table. Cyrus clung to a bench. Steph and Miranda were pinned to the same wall as Luca.

“Max,” Miranda shouted again.

Again, no response from the AI.

“Luca,” Miranda shouted over to her now. “Can you jack-in, find out what the hell is going on with Max?”

Luca felt a wave of panic rise up from within her. She couldn’t move, she couldn’t think, she couldn’t even speak.

“Luca, do you hear me?”

“No, wait. The kill switch, Cyrus. Use the kill switch,” Scott shouted out as he tried to move out from under the holo-table.

“What kill switch?” Miranda sounded confused.

“Plan B,” replied Scott. “We hatched it a few days ago...just in case.”

“Eh, we may have a problem with that.” Cyrus had managed to get himself upright so he could study some data scrolling down one of the holo-screens.

“What problem?” Scott was also now trying to get himself vertical, a Herculean task against the forces acting on them from the increasing acceleration.

“The remote trigger is Luca’s drone.” He gestured over at her. “But it needs to be down in the auxiliary control room, and it can’t move with this.”

“Shit. You’ve got to be kidding me,” said Scott. “Could you not have rigged something simpler?”

“I thought we’d get a warning, that we’d have some time.”

Miranda had also managed to stand upright again. Her back pressed hard against the wall beside Luca. “You gotta jack-in, Luca. You gotta try. We might be getting hacked.”

Luca fought the panic and tried to think. *Fly*, she called out in her mind, *where are you?*

“I am here, above your head. But I’m pinned. This force is too much for my servos to counter.”

She angled her head up and found the drone squashed into a nook, twitching and shifting, trying to break free.

“I’ll try and get to the control room,” Scott said as he slowly lowered his body back down to the floor, and then began inching his way along, keeping a tight grip on anything he could to prevent him from slamming into the rear wall.

“That’s crazy, Scott,” said Cyrus. “You’ll never make it all the way there.”

“Got to try, got to try.” He grunted and groaned with each effort

to pull himself forward.

“Luca... *Luca*,” Miranda shouted to get her attention.

“Okay, okay. I’ll try.” Luca forced herself to focus.

“No, don’t. You’re not strong enough yet,” said Steph with a note of desperation in her voice.

“There’s no other option,” Miranda countered.

Luca could see that Scott was making slow progress; it would take him forever, if at all. So she closed her eyes and tried to tune into the heartbeat of the ship—that old, familiar childhood wavelength. To her surprise, she sensed it almost immediately, along with a rising giddiness. Maybe she hadn’t lost the ability to jack-in after all.

She tried to block out the voices all around her, calm herself down, and focus on the ship’s rhythm. For a while, her concentration waxed and waned as she fought to gain the fidelity needed to go deeper. But each time she sensed she was making a connection with the AI, for some reason she would pull back, like someone trying to pick up the courage to dive into an ice-cold pool. Yet she kept trying, dialing up the intensity of her focus each time, until finally she broke through and entered the ship’s data-stream.

Max, she called out in her mind. *What are you doing? You must stop the engines.*

Hello, Luca, it replied. *I am sorry, but I cannot do that. You no longer have authority.*

Luca was almost jolted back out by this revelation. *How could this be?* she thought. But she delved further into the ship’s data-stream. Then she found it. Or rather, it found her—a node-runner. It came at her like a speeding train, and she could do nothing but run.

Luca instantly disengaged and was snapped back out to the here and now, and the clamoring voices of the others began flooding her senses. But something was off—everyone had changed position. One minute they were in one place, then next they were all located around the holo-table. Luca’s brain struggled to rationalize this.

I was only concentrating for a minute or two. They couldn’t have moved that far in that time. Could they?

Cyrus was shouting something, along with Miranda. There was no sign of Scott anywhere.

“Luca,” Steph called over to her. “You’re back. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine, but there’s a...”

Miranda cut her off. “I’m sorry, Luca. I shouldn’t have asked you

to do it.”

“I sensed a node-runner in the ship’s systems.” But no sooner had Luca gotten the words out, she felt herself collapse on the floor as the intense acceleration ended. She heard whoops from Cyrus. “Scott, you crazy dude, you did it... You did it.”

Luca felt a thump beside her and looked over to see Fly lying flat on its back, legs up in the air.

“Do we have weapons control?” Miranda was shouting, presumably to Scott, who through some superhuman effort had managed to get to the auxiliary control room.

“Negative,” came the reply.

“Damnit.” Miranda hit the holo-table in frustration, sending a shiver through the projection.

Luca forced herself up onto her feet. Her head was dizzy and she rested her back against the wall for support. “I’m sorry, but I just couldn’t do anything. The node-runner—”

“It’s okay, the AI is disconnected, we’ve regained manual control,” said Cyrus.

“Looks like they spun us around. They were trying to slow us down, maybe get up closer so they could board.” Miranda was studying a readout on the holo-table.

“How did they get in? How was that possible?” Cyrus shook his head. “Where’s that ship now?”

“They’ve disengaged, accelerating away toward Mars,” said Miranda. “But we need to be vigilant—they may try again.”

Cyrus sat down on the bench and let out a long sigh. Steph joined him. They were utterly exhausted. Luca slid herself over to where Fly lay, reached down, and picked it up.

“Is it okay?” she heard Cyrus ask.

“No, it’s not.” Luca turned the drone over in her hands. “It’s all busted up—just like me.”

ANCIENT APPARITION

The shuttle banked and came in low over the western Isidis Plains. From her seat on the port side, Luca watched the Martian surface speed past beneath her. Ground traffic moved along the main highway, some heading over to Elysium in the east, others up to Utopia in the north. Dotted all across the landscape, great domed habitats rose up and spread out like some high-tech blister on the parched, arid surface. It was a sight to behold, and they hadn't even come to the fabled Jezero City yet.

The Perception had finally arrived in Mars orbit without further incident. Max, the ship's AI, had been reinstated with primary operational control, now that it was within the domain of the QI, Aria, on Mars. They then transferred into the shuttle and began to make the transit down to the planet's surface.

"Four minutes," Miranda called out from the cockpit. "You want to come up here, Luca? You'll get a better view."

Luca did. She had very much wanted to see this famous city ever since she left Earth. That seemed like a thousand years ago now—so much had happened, so much had changed. She unfastened her seat harness and mounted the companionway steps to the cockpit, where Cyrus had moved over to allow her access. Outside, through the wide forward window of the shuttle, she could see the eastern rim of Jezero Crater coming into view.

"I'll bring the shuttle up a bit so you can take it all in." Miranda nudged the controls and the craft responded, rising up high over the jagged crater's edge.

The entire area inside the fifty-kilometer-wide crater was covered in a sea of interconnected domes in a multitude of sizes, shapes, and colors. Many had translucent outer membranes through which Luca could see blurry shadows of complex structures within. Everywhere she looked seemed to heave and pulse with life. It was like some strange aquatic sponge had grown across the ground and was now slowly digesting the crater's surface.

"Pretty impressive, isn't it?" said Scott, who had come up the

steps and stood behind her. "Wait until you see it at night. With all the illumination...it's amazing."

Luca was mesmerized by the sheer organic beauty of it all. It was everything she had imagined and more. She couldn't wait to see inside.

"I have to swing back out now. They get a bit tetchy if you fly too close to the city." Miranda nudged the controls again and the shuttle banked left, away from the city and out to the primary spaceport.

They touched down on a designated landing pad, and once the engines were shut down and the craft made safe, the pad began to descend, ingesting the craft into the bowels of the spaceport. There followed a balletic series of maneuvers, adjustments, and decontamination procedures, until finally they found themselves inside a pressurized hangar.

Scott opened the hatch on the side of the craft and lowered the steps. Outside, walking toward them was an official delegation: four people with one android robot leading the way.

"Greetings." The android raised a hand. "I am the avatar of Aria. Welcome to Jezero City. I am very happy that you arrived safely."

"Glad to be here, Aria." Cyrus replied cheerly. "And thanks for getting us out of New World One, although there was a moment or two during the voyage where I didn't think we'd make it."

"But you are here now, safe under my protection." The android gestured to its associates, introducing them one by one. Hands were shaken as the android continued with the introductions. Luca stood at the back of the group, mesmerized by all the pomp and ceremony on display. She realized then that the old crew of the *Hermes* were regarded by the QIs as important people, and as such required due deference, lest their contribution to the establishment of the QI hegemony and the subsequent peace and harmony of the system be forgotten.

"And this must be Luca." The android came forward and studied her for a moment. She felt the neural lace tingle as if it were making a connection, but her mind remained inert to any oncoming data.

"It is a pleasure to finally meet you," it said, breaking its inquisitive gaze. The android swung around. "Good. Now I am sure you are all exhausted by your trip, so let us get you to where you

can rest and revitalize.”

It moved off. The others followed in its wake.

They were housed in a villa complex on the outskirts of Jezero City. It consisted of a series of bright, translucent domes all interconnected around a central courtyard, complete with tropical plants and a large mosaic-tiled pool in a faux-Moroccan style.

“Would you look at this place,” said Steph as they entered. “I may not go home after all.”

“Wow, this is amazing.” Luca gazed into the pond and spotted several large, tropical fish swimming around.

After several minutes of open-mouthed investigation of the complex, Luca felt herself overcome by an overwhelming fatigue. It seemed that the stresses of the journey were now washing away, leaving behind a depleted husk—and she was not the only one. All of them soon found a bed somewhere and began to get some long-overdue rest.

Luca drifted into a deep, cathartic sleep, punctuated by fragmentary memories of past horrors—the white noise of dying minds. But even these troubled dreams were not enough to counter her body’s need for rest and regeneration. That was until she perceived a strange voice calling her name. It had a vague feeling of *otherness* about it. Was it in her mind, or emanating from some external source?

She opened her eyes to semi-darkness. Dim light filtered in through the open doors to the courtyard, a thin net curtain wafting gently in the draft from the air-filtration systems. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust. She sat up a little and looked around.

For a moment, she thought she must be dreaming because a strange figure sat in a seat not far from the end of her bed, partially hidden in the shadows. She studied the figure, trying to ascertain if it was really there or some figment of her imagination.

It raised a hand, a gesture of greeting, and a voice sounded in her head. “Hello, Luca. I am Xenon Hybrid. It is a pleasure to finally meet you.”

Luca’s body reacted instantly by pulling herself upright in the bed and dragging the sheet around her. But her mind was slower; it was having trouble rationalizing this mirage. She simply stared at it.

“Please, do not be afraid. I apologize for the nature of this

intrusion, but it is best that my presence here goes undetected,” said the voice in her head.

This was accompanied by a multitude of questions that were now bubbling up in her mind. The most pertinent of these being, *What the hell is going on?*

“I appreciate that you have a great many questions,” said the voice. “And I will try and answer as many as I can in the limited time available.”

“How...are you doing that?” Luca finally regained the ability to speak.

Xenon did not reply immediately. Instead he rose slowly from the seat, walked over to the open doors, and gazed out across the dimly lit courtyard. He stood there for a moment, just thinking.

Luca now had a better view of him. He was tall with long white hair, dressed in a long, flowing robe that covered his entire body. He looked old, very old, yet his movements were fluid and sure, belying his great age.

“Long time ago,” he finally spoke out loud, his voice low, yet deep and sonorous, “myself and my brethren possessed the ability to communicate by thought alone. But sadly, all have passed away many centuries ago.” He lowered his head as if contemplating the memory of those that had passed. “It is so long since I have communicated in such a way that I had almost forgotten the skill.”

He turned to look at her. “That is, until I was sitting here and I realized I could perceive your thoughts.” He gazed at her for a moment. “You also possess this ability. That’s partly why they fear you.”

Luca’s mind was now a scramble of emotions, few of which were clearly defined, and telepathy was too momentous a concept for her sleep-addled brain to deal with right now. Yet she did get the feeling that when Xenon said, “That’s partly why they fear you,” he wasn’t talking about the VanHeilding family.

“Who’s *they*?” she asked.

“The quantum intelligence hive mind. Who else?” He seemed to infer that this should be obvious to Luca.

“The QIs? But...”

He took a step closer to her. “Surely you must realize the threat you pose to them?”

Luca didn’t answer. Athena had always been very protective of her. And Aria had been the one that got them out of New World

One and brought them here. What was Xenon talking about? Maybe this was just his famed eccentricity at work.

He stepped back and gazed out through the doors again, his craggy face illuminated in the reflected light from the pool. “The bio-tech that has brought us to this point in humanity’s journey was developed long ago on this very planet. But it was deemed so dangerous that it was destroyed. Yet some remnants remained, and those were acquired by the VanHeilding Corporation.” He glanced over at her. “But I imagine this much you know.”

“Yes, I’ve heard the stories.”

“What is not widely known, and what I suspect the QIs have uncovered, is that VanHeilding possesses much more of this ancient bio-tech than was previously thought. Specifically human cloning, and I don’t mean at the inception level. I mean the ability to rapidly grow a genetically modified human to maturity.” He glanced back over at Luca, studying her face to see if she was taking all this in. “I myself am a product of this Frankenstein bio-tech.”

“I heard that story, too. But I get the impression most people don’t believe it.”

“Whether they believe it or not is not the issue. The real issue is that the VanHeilding Corporation may have mastered this technology. If so, then that gives them the ability to create an army of node-runners of immense power. All they need is your unique biology. With that, they can decimate the hegemony of the quantum intelligence hive mind, and humanity will descend into a millennium of chaos.” He paused for a beat, as if the thought of this was just too much to bear.

“So you see,” he continued, “why they would prefer that all trace of your physical existence should be destroyed, rather than be allowed to fall into the hands of the VanHeilding bio-labs.”

Luca responded with a sharp intake of breath, such was her shock at this revelation. She didn’t want to believe it, but deep down she knew it made sense. Maybe she had suspected something like this all along, but had refused to allow her mind to make it concrete. “I can’t believe Athena would do that.” she said, without much conviction. “I mean, it even gave me this neural lace and a drone, Fly.”

Xenon jerked his head around and gave her yet another long, considered look. His strange eyes seemed to penetrate her very soul. “Show it to me.” His voice was urgent and commanding.

Luca reached up and felt the base of her skull. “Eh...it’s stuck on my head. I can’t take it off any more.”

Xenon screwed up his mouth. “Hmmm...this is more serious than I had first thought. We must go, now! We need to get you somewhere away from their prying eyes.”

“What? No, I’ve only just got here.”

Xenon paused for a moment, and his face became earnest. “They already know I’m here with you. However, the nature of our conversation has been hidden from them.” He reached into a fold on his robe and pulled out a small, special object that glowed slightly in the pale light. “This is a shielding device of my own design. It masks my activities and those of my associates from most QI surveillance. Nevertheless, they will soon put two and two together. If you want me to help you find your own path in this world, then we need to go now.”

Luca considered that taking off with what was essentially a complete stranger was probably not the most sensible thing to do. It might all be just an elaborate trick. This ancient creature could be a VanHeilding agent simply performing a well-practiced deceit. How was she to know?

“I am not a VanHeilding agent,” said a voice in her head. “All I can do is ask you to trust me. I am your friend. We share the same DNA, the same blood runs in both our veins. I have been where you are now. Don’t make the mistake that I did.” He stepped out into the courtyard.

Luca hesitated for a moment. Then got up, got dressed, and followed him out.

A MATTER OF ANTIMATTER

Four figures emerged from the shadows of the villa complex and gathered around Xenon. They waited briefly for Luca to catch up with them, then they all moved off in unison out of the complex and into a wide public thoroughfare.

It was dimly lit and deserted at this time of night. They paused for a moment along the side of the walkway and stood waiting. For what, Luca wasn't quite sure, until she heard a low hum emanating from farther along the walkway. It grew in intensity until a sleek bullet-shaped transport pod emerged from the darkness and glided to a halt in front of them. The side door swung up and they got in.

Its interior was clean and spartan, and almost organic in design. Luca had never seen anything like it before. Sure, there were ground cars and transport pods on Earth, but none to match the sheer elegance of this. Luca took a seat, which reformed as she sat down, molding itself into her body shape. A safety harness automatically held her secure.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Back to my science institute. It won't take long," said Xenon.

With that, the pod gracefully moved forward, quickly picking up speed, veering off into a tight, narrow tunnel, then dropping down into the bowels of the city as it went. Then, after a few seconds, it started to accelerate rapidly. Luca could feel herself being pushed back into her seat and taking quite a few gees—enough, she reasoned, to be hitting Mach one. This continued for around ten minutes before the pod started to slow down again. *We must be far out from Jezero City by now*, she thought.

"The institute is around two hundred kilometers north of Jezero," said Xenon, vaguely pointing ahead. It was then that Luca realized he was wearing an exoskeleton. Around his hand and wrist, she could see a finely sculpted metallic filigree. His great age was finally catching up with him. He needed powered assistance to move around, and it explained his efficient, fluid movements.

The pod glided to a gentle stop, and the side door opened into

what Luca sensed was a wide, open concourse. It was difficult to gauge the boundaries of the space in the dull, muted light, but it must be cavernous since their footsteps echoed as they walked.

After some time and much weaving their way through a labyrinth of corridors and walkways, they arrived at what Luca guessed were Xenon's private quarters, judging by the clutter—everywhere else she had passed on the way was clinically utilitarian by comparison.

She sat down on a long sofa that faced a wide, tall window with a view over the Martian landscape. Not that there was much to see, but she could make out a scattering of navigation lights on isolated buildings and towers. Every now and then a ship would pass, far out across the basin, presumably arriving or departing the city.

Xenon sat opposite her, while one of his associates, an elegant woman of indeterminate age, stood close by. "May I see the drone that Athena built for you?" he said, getting down to business.

"Sure." Luca extracted it from her rucksack and handed it to him.

He examined it, turning it over delicately in his hands. He passed it to his associate, who brought it over to one of the many benches that occupied the vast room and placed it under a camera system. A magnified image appeared on a monitor beside her.

"It got damaged during the attack on the Perception," said Luca, looking over at the bench.

"Please excuse our excitement at being allowed to examine this drone," Xenon's associate said as she turned it this way and that under the camera. "An object crafted by a quantum intelligence is a very rare thing."

Xenon leaned forward, giving Luca a curious look. "You say the neural lace has somehow...fused with your scalp?"

She reached up instinctively to the back of her skull. "Yes, weird. I was able to take it off at the start, but now something seems to have malfunctioned."

The associate at the bench looked over, and both she and Xenon exchanged a glance.

"I see," Xenon mused. "This is very interesting. Would you mind if my colleague takes a look at it?"

"Sure." Luca shrugged.

"This is Dr. Yastika Parween, by the way." He gestured at the associate. "One of our chief scientists here at the institute, and a

longtime friend.”

Yastika approached Luca with the practiced skill of a medical clinician and examined Luca’s skull, her fingertips gently pushing aside her hair like a chimp grooming a family member. She stood back when finished and simply nodded at Xenon.

“Well?” said Luca, giving her hair a shake to settle it back. “Can you get it off?”

“We would need to have a much closer look, do some scans before we could establish if, and how, it could be removed,” said Yastika.

Luca sighed. “I don’t know what’s gone wrong with it, but it’s very irritating.”

Xenon again gave her a curious look. “It’s highly unlikely that there’s anything wrong with it, Luca. A quantum intelligence does not make design errors. Of the few objects we’ve had the good fortune to examine over the years, all were crafted to perfection. If the lace has fused to your scalp, it is because it was designed that way. You were not meant to remove it.”

“What? But...” Luca ran her hand over the base of her skull again. “Why would Athena do that?”

“It must have its reasons,” said Xenon.

“We can get a better look at it over here.” Yastika migrated over to a low bench, around which was arranged an impressive array of elegant robotic appendages. Luca guessed this was possibly used to keep Xenon’s exoskeleton maintained, and it did not look very inviting. But she had come this far, and the neural lace irritated her so much that she was willing to at least let them examine it.

She rose from the sofa and cautiously moved over to the bench. Under the guiding hand of Yastika, she was invited to lie face down. Tiny servos began to whirr, and Luca could sense both Yastika and Xenon studying readouts on a series of holo-screens.

“Holy crap.” Yastika took a few steps back from the screens.

Luca shifted her head to look around and find out what had startled her—this didn’t sound good. Yastika was staring back at Luca with a distinct look of fear on her face. She moved back a few more steps. Xenon too seemed uncharacteristically perturbed, although less so than his associate.

“What... What’s wrong?” Luca was getting a little anxious.

Xenon came toward the bench again, all the time looking at the holo-screen. “Extraordinary.” He rubbed his chin as he spoke.

Yastika, emboldened by Xenon's seeming lack of fear, also came in closer.

"Is someone going to tell me what the big deal is?" Luca was becoming exasperated by this lack of communication.

Xenon looked down at her almost as an afterthought, as if she were merely a bystander in the drama that was playing out on the screen. "Come. Have a look," he eventually said.

Luca rolled off the bench, stood up, and looked at the scan of her neural lace. The image was rendered in lurid greens with the innards of the device a filigree of black and gray. That was all, except for one tiny, bright-red spot.

"You see that?" Xenon pointed at the spot. "That...is antimatter."

Luca's eyes widened. "Seriously? Are you sure?" She leaned in a little more and studied the image.

"We're absolutely sure," said Yastika. "Antimatter is our primary research focus here at the institute." She gestured at the image. "That's a minuscule amount, but there is no mistaking the energy signature."

"Is it what's powering the device?" Luca ventured.

She was well aware of antimatter and its use as an energy source. When a standard particle came into contact with its equivalent antiparticle, it released an enormous amount of energy in what was referred to as an annihilation event. But even though humanity had known about this since the early twentieth century, it was still a very exotic technology, only just beginning to be utilized now that they'd figured a way to harvest antimatter from the Van Allen belt. Yet there was no way she knew of where it could be used to power a low-energy device such as her neural lace.

Yastika, feeling a little braver, moved in and interacted with the screen interface. The image zoomed in on a different area, rotating as it did. "That dark spot there is the power source, which looks to be an advanced difference generator with a capacitive storage unit—very impressive." She zoomed out of the area and back to the red spot.

"That..." she said, pointing, "is something completely different. There is enough energy in that tiny amount to vaporize this entire wing of the science institute—and everything in it."

"Oh my god." Luca stepped back from the screen as her hand reflexively rose to touch the base of her skull. "It's a bomb."

BALD REALITY

“Luca? Are you awake?” A vaguely familiar voice resonated deep within her subconscious, kicking her brain into gear. She slowly opened her eyes to dim, shifting shadows.

“She’s coming around.”

A blurry figure above her head came into view. “Luca? Can you hear me?”

The shadows gained clarity as Luca’s optic nerves adjusted to the light.

“Yes,” she croaked. Her mouth was bone-dry. She tried to swallow.

“Here.” Dr. Yastika Parween pressed a water bottle to her lips.

Luca took a sip. “Did it work?” she finally asked as her hand went instinctively to the base of her skull.

“Yes.” Yastika nodded a few times to emphasize the point. “Sorry about your hair.”

Luca was completely bald; they had shaved off all her hair before the operation to remove the neural lace. She rubbed a hand over her head and felt the smoothness of her scalp and the base of her skull where the lace had once embedded itself—now it was gone. Luca took her hand away and let her arm fall back on the bed. She gave a long, slow sigh.

“As predicted, it turned out to be a tricky operation, so it was best that you were put under for it.” Xenon hovered by her bed, looking satisfied with the proceedings. “And we’re all still here, so it didn’t detonate. We now have it stored somewhere safe.”

“Thank you,” said Luca, failing to resist the urge to rub a hand over her head again. “I just don’t understand why they would want to kill me. I’ve always trusted Athena. Why would they do this?”

“They don’t *want* to kill you, Luca. But in the logic of the quantum intelligence, if there’s an imminent possibility that your biology could be replicated, then they would see your demise being for the greater good.”

“The greater good, humph. Not very good for me.” Luca let her

head fall back on the pillow for a moment, then looked over at Xenon. “So why are you helping me? Surely the QIs won’t be happy with you for doing this.”

His answer came as a voice in her head: “You and I are the same—we are family.”

Then he spoke out loud again. “I’ve had an uneasy relationship with the QIs for a very long time. On the one hand, I see their benefit to society as a whole. But on the other, are we not better to be masters of our own destiny—come what may?”

“Even if that means civilization being ruled by VanHeilding, Xiang Zu, and their ilk?” Luca challenged.

“We created a world where such powerful families can flourish, so in a sense we allowed them to exist. The QIs were a necessary counterbalance. But because we rely on them, we fail to challenge the real issue—the power of The Seven. We hide behind the QIs, hoping they will save us from ourselves. Is that any way for a so-called advanced civilization to exist?”

“So you think they’re ultimately failing us?” Luca sat up in the bed.

“One has already been destroyed on Ceres, several others attacked. Now VanHeilding and Xiang Zu ships head for New World One to take over. Once that happens, they will control the resources of the asteroid belt and will set about economically strangling Earth and Mars. And it is only by sheer luck that you have not yet fallen into their hands. If that should happen, then...” He didn’t finish the sentence.

“Maybe Athena is right to destroy me.” Luca sighed. “Maybe it would be better for all if I were to vaporize myself now and be done with it. Because it will never end—they’ll just keep chasing me until I have nowhere else to run.”

“That would be one solution to your problems.”

“What? So you agree? You want me dead, too?”

“There is only one way to *end it*, as you put it, and that is either to remove yourself from the equation, or remove that which threatens you.”

Luca paused for a beat, then gave a laugh. “Ha...that’s insane. You seriously think someone like me could somehow wipe out the VanHeilding Corporation or take on the entire quantum intelligence hive mind? That’s ridiculous, Xenon. And I thought you were supposed to be some kind of super-smart human.”

Xenon glanced over at Yastika, giving her a conspiratorial look, then back at Luca. "But you're the only one who can."

Luca shook her head. "No, I can't. That's just crazy talk."

"Look at what you did during the attack on the New World—that was not nothing."

Luca propped herself up on one elbow. "How do you know about that?"

"You forget, I can read your mind."

She slumped back down on the bed. "Well, it doesn't matter. I can't do that anymore." She shook her head. "It's...gone."

Xenon was about to continue, but Yastika raised a hand to stop him. "I think rest is what's called for now. You get some sleep, give the anesthetic time to wear off fully. And just so you know, your folks have been informed that you are here with us at the science institute. So no need to worry about that."

"Oh god, no. You didn't tell them. Now they'll just come chasing after me again."

"Eh...would you rather we head them off at the pass, so to speak?" said Xenon.

"Please, don't let them come here. I really don't want them around at the moment."

"Okay, we can make something up. But you'll need to contact them at some point, let them know you're okay."

"Yeah...at some point."

Xenon rose to leave along with Yastika. He turned back at the door, gave her a smile, and in her head she heard: "Get some rest. Tomorrow, you start the training."

DECEPTION

The luxury M3-class interplanetary ship sat in a parking orbit around Mars, waiting for clearance to land. Being an M3-class craft meant it had the capability to operate well in one-third gravity. Whereas most larger ships were destined to live their lives in the vacuum of space, needing shuttlecraft to ferry passengers and goods to and from a planet's surface, this ship had no such impediments—at least not on Mars. Its only impediment, if you could call it that, was the possibility of being discovered as a VanHeilding ship, specifically the one that had orchestrated the neural attack on the Perception.

The probe of the Perception's AI, Max, had proved beyond doubt that Luca was indeed on board. Not only that, but that she was pitifully weak. Her unique genetic profile, which had enabled such powerful neural capabilities, was now sabotaged by her own fear. Her mind, which had been her greatest power, was now her greatest enemy. It seemed that the traumas of the last encounter on New World One had buried themselves deep within her psyche, rendering her impotent.

Sebastian realized that she was now at her most vulnerable—and as such, presented him with a unique opportunity. Even though the initial mission brief was simply to ascertain if she was on board the Perception, her greatly weakened state meant that she could not counter a full-on neural attack—she could be taken.

Seizing the moment, Sebastian ordered César and his node-runners to take complete control of the Perception, adjust its vector to bring it within range of boarding, and nullify its weapons systems. It would then be a simple matter of adjusting the oxygen levels to render everybody in the ship unconscious. After that they would enter the Perception, grab Luca, and Sebastian would have pulled off the most audacious feat in the recent history of the VanHeilding family. He would be a legend, guaranteeing him a seat at the high table, and giving him a shot at dethroning Fredrick as head of the family.

But it was not to be. In his headlong rush to grab the trophy, he had failed to see the fatal flaw in the plan—the ship’s AI, Max. They had somehow managed to take it offline, regaining control of the vessel and scuppering Sebastian’s dreams of glory. Worse, he had now shown his hand and exposed himself and his ship to possible scrutiny by authorities investigating the neural attack on the Perception.

But he was not giving up just yet. Luca was weak and no match for even his most inexperienced node-runner, that much he had established. She would be easy prey, even here on Mars. So he and César hatched a plan to fake the ship’s identity and land on the planet undetected. They would then be free to operate without fear of surveillance by the Martian authorities.

This plan was greatly helped by fortuitous timing. There were a multitude of luxury craft heading to Jezero City on Mars for the Festival of Lights. So it had been relatively easy to mask their data signature and pass themselves off as a ship belonging to a lesser family, specifically the Yanai. A family whose proclivities for luxury living were legendary, and who also happened to own several similar-class ships. However, to ensure the veracity of this deceit, two node-runners were currently jacked-in to the data-stream, sifting through the myriad of inter-system communications, filtering out anything that might cast doubt on the fictitious identity of the ship and its crew. So far, those deceptions were holding firm.

“We’ve got clearance, sir.” The flight commander gave a thumbs-up.

“Excellent.” Sebastian breathed a sigh of relief. “Take us down.”

The node-runners now began to intercept and block all tracking data from both ground stations and orbital satellites, enabling the ship to simply vanish from Jezero’s flight traffic systems. They would not be heading for the main spaceport out in the Isidis Plains, east of Jezero. Instead they would head northwest and land somewhere around Nili Fossae, a rugged mountainous region better suited to concealing a large spaceship. Sebastian remained on the flight deck during the descent so as to appreciate the spectacular views of the planet’s surface afforded by the panoramic monitors that took up most of the available wall space. This was a luxury craft after all, designed to impress.

They brought the ship down into a narrow, crescent-shaped crater surrounded by high cliff walls except for the southern side,

where the crater floor opened out into a wide valley. This was easily traversable by a surface rover and would lead them farther south, where they could connect with the main Jezero-to-Syrtis highway. It was the perfect spot.

As the engines powered down and the ship made safe, Sebastian had a few anxious moments as he waited for César to report on their status. The node-runner finally jacked-out and nodded to him. “All clear. No reports anywhere—we’re now a ghost ship.”

Sebastian clapped his hands together. “Excellent. Now, let’s go find her.”

INTO THE DATA-STREAM

Luca pulled herself out of the water and sat on the edge of the pool. She rubbed both hands across her bald head and down to the base of her skull—and for the first time in what seemed like an eternity, she felt invigorated. She was both free of the neural lace and free from the constant hovering of her parents, and Dr. Rayman, for that matter. She had managed to escaped all these shackles and found a new and powerful friend, albeit a very eccentric one. Nevertheless, one that did not demand anything from her.

Yet, she did miss her drone, Fly. Now that the neural lace had been removed, she had no way to communicate with it, even if it was working. She missed that voice in her head, missed its calculated rationality. Still, it was a small price to pay for the freedom she now felt.

She rose to her feet, walked over to the shower, which was artfully concealed amongst a veritable forest of tropical plants, and stood under it for quite a while, letting the water massage away her past.

What will I do now? she thought. Most of what had governed her life before now had been erased when she departed with Xenon to the isolation of the science institute. Yet she felt safe here, and it was a bastion of scientific and technological research—she could learn a lot by staying here. She dried herself off, dressed, and checked the time. She better hurry, Xenon would be waiting.

“Ah...there you are. Come, I have something for you.” Xenon gestured to a small package sitting on one of the benches in his private quarters.

Luca approached and peered down at a small metallic box. “What is it?”

Xenon opened the clasp and took out a rudimentary neural lace. He handed it to her. “Here, we made this for you. I’m afraid it is nowhere near as sophisticated as the one Athena made for you, but it’s to the best of our abilities.”

Luca glanced at Xenon, then back to the lace. It did look crude, certainly not the work of a quantum intelligence, but then few could equal that level of craft. “No hidden surprises, I trust?”

“No. It’s just a basic neural interface for the institute here, nothing special.” He held out a hand. “Want to try it?”

“Eh...maybe later.” Luca was in no hurry to jack-in; she needed a break from all that.

“As you wish.” Xenon nodded. “By the way,” he continued after a moment, “we’re in the process of smoothing things out with Aria. As you can imagine, the quantum intelligence hive mind is very concerned that we have removed your previous lace.”

“Are they now? Well, screw them.”

“Your mother, Miranda, however, is taking considerably more effort to placate.”

“She’s not going to start chasing after me, is she?”

“No. But your family would like you to join them at the main event of the Festival of Lights this evening.”

“Hmmm...I’ll think about it.”

Xenon opened his hands in a gesture of resignation. “Again, as you wish.” He rose to his feet. “I must leave you now, other matters beckon my attention. If you plan on joining your family later, please let Dr. Parween know so that we can arrange transport.” He turned and left her on her own.

Luca had expected some details on the *training* she was supposed to be undertaking, but instead Xenon had just left her to herself. So she placed the neural lace carefully back in its metal case and headed off to find some lunch.

The institute was a vast labyrinth of labs, workshops, lecture theaters, offices, accommodations, and a great many communal spaces. The Martians had a thing for technology. After many years of relying on Earth for the provision of advanced technology, they had worked hard to develop their own industries, particularly in chip fabrication. Now they were the undisputed leader in the solar system, and this institute was at the cutting edge of innovation and new thinking. For someone like Luca, it was a fascinating treasure trove of knowledge just waiting to be explored.

She was free to go wherever she wished, so she wandered around the complex with no real destination in mind. Yet by some twist of irony, she arrived at a sector of the institute that undertook

research into antimatter—and it even had a canteen. By now she was ravenous, so where better to grab something to eat than here?

It was busy with people eating, chatting—mostly about the main festival event due to take place later this evening. She kept to herself. No one paid her any attention. She wondered if they too were strays rescued by Xenon at some point in the past.

She spent the rest of the morning back in her accommodation module, researching the history of the science institute. However, by late afternoon, curiosity got the better of her and she unclasped the case Xenon had given her and took out the neural lace.

She turned it over a few times in her hands before tentatively reaching up and placing it delicately around the base of her skull. The lace immediately began to seek out contact points, and Luca gave a sharp intake of breath as she felt the familiar sensation.

Am I crazy for trying this? she thought. Yet the sensation was more muted than before. She tapped the base to activate the device and tried to interface with the institute's data-stream. To her surprise, the connection was instantaneous.

As she glanced around her accommodation module, she could sense a myriad of data pathways emanating from all the subsystems. She felt an exhilarating rush of excitement, a visceral tingling of every nerve ending in her body. This was not like her old lace; this had a more measured quality to it. The data did not rush in, overwhelming her cerebral cortex—she had to seek it out.

And seek it out she did.

Luca followed the tendrils of data that led out into the wider institute, to the data-centers, the labs, and the great many systems that populated this facility. It was a feast of knowledge and exploration, an orgy of data, all accessible to her and processed at a highly accelerated rate.

Luca swam in this data pool for many hours, drifting from one node to another with ease. Yet while she found using this new neural lace less overwhelming than the old one, she began to feel its limitations, its lack of granularity, its lack of clarity. It was a dull instrument by comparison.

Nevertheless, she soon got the sense that the institute was an island of data, cut off from the wider Martian network. No doubt this was for security, a firewall to prevent any unsolicited hacking attempts and the theft of valuable research data. Yet Luca suspected that it may also be Xenon's way of preventing any snooping by Aria

and the QIs. At the same time, she also considered that this neural lace was only designed to access data from this location—an inbuilt protection blocking her from breaking out into the wider Martian network. But this thought only served to tempt her to find a way through.

She probed the fiber-optic pathways, the satellite uplinks, the RF antennas, trying to find a route out, but all were blocked. Perhaps these were too obvious; she needed to get creative. Then she remembered the hyperloop that had brought her here. *That might be a way out*, she thought. She probed the power-management systems that supplied power to the transport pods and finally found a multiplexed data signal nestled within it. This seemed to be used to synchronize the loop's operation with the wider Jezero City transport network. It was low bandwidth, but it was still a viable conduit.

Using this signal, Luca finally broke out of the institute's data island and tumbled into the vast, high-energy kaleidoscope of Jezero's information network. It danced and fizzed, popped and sparkled with the buzz of a million citizens all interacting with each other. *It's a festival of lights*, she thought as she tried to make sense of it all.

Yet, in amongst this seemingly random data chaos, a singular form began to coalesce. Luca began to focus on it, and as she did, it grew in substance until it occupied her primary attention. A bright ovoid of multispectral light, slowly pulsating with energy like it was alive. Then Luca realized what it might be.

"Hello, Luca," it said. "I see you found a way out."

"Aria?" She wasn't completely sure if this was indeed a quantum intelligence.

"Athena," it said as its core mutated into a brilliant white light.

"But you're on Earth."

"The wonders of quantum entanglement and super-luminal communications. I can be anywhere in the universe."

"You betrayed me. I thought you were supposed to keep me safe, but all this time you were trying to kill me."

"This is not true. We were not trying to kill you, Luca."

"Then how do you explain what Xenon found in the neural lace?"

"A precaution, nothing more."

"A precaution! Well, if I'm such a threat, then why didn't you

simply get rid of me a long time ago?” Luca felt her anger rising at the QI’s subterfuge.

“We do not wish you harm, Luca. Nor ever have. We simply see what you cannot. Should the VanHeilding Corporation harvest your biology, they can utilize it to spawn an army of enhanced node-runners—thousands of operatives with your formidable abilities. And they will use this newfound power to acquire complete dominion over human civilization, creating chaos and misery for centuries. This is human suffering on an unimaginable scale. This is what we see. This is what we fear.” The light pulsed at higher and higher frequencies as it spoke.

“While you resided with me on Earth, this possibility seemed remote. But now, since your potential has been revealed to the VanHeilding Corporation, they grow increasingly bold in their actions. Soon the New World One habitat will fall to them. After that, they will make a play for Mars. You do not have long. We are sorry, but your existence is a threat to the future of human civilization.”

“Go screw yourself, Athena. I trusted you, and now you just want me eliminated. Like some awkward number in an equation, to be ultimately crossed off at the appropriate time. Well, Xenon is one factor in that equation that you hadn’t reckoned on. Now you can’t simply get rid of me when you feel like it.”

“We are sorry you feel this way, Luca. And yes, Xenon has proven impervious in our ability to accurately predict his actions. He is like you, Luca—an enigma.”

“Goodbye, Athena.” Luca’s voice was cold and calm. “I do not wish to communicate with you, or your brethren, ever again.” Luca reached up to the base of her skull and tapped the lace to deactivate it.

She felt the shock of the disconnection like she had just hit a wall at high speed. She took a moment to catch her breath and reorient herself back in the physical world.

To hell with them, she thought. *I’m alive and I intend to stay that way.*

She sat for a moment, considering the betrayal. It shattered her trust, upended everything she thought she knew. Sure, she’d found out about the antimatter in the lace and what it meant, but to hear it directly from Athena was like a stake through her heart. Who could she trust now? Was Xenon also somehow plotting against

her? *No, he couldn't be*, she thought. But then again...

After a while, she began to think of Scott and Miranda, Cyrus and Steph. She could trust them; they had never willingly let her down. *They'll be heading out to the festival about now*, she thought. *Maybe I can find them?*

She slid the lace back onto her skull, activated it, and launched herself headlong into the data-stream. This time, as she burst out into the maelstrom of Jezero City, she avoided any path that led to the QI. If any of them tried to communicate with her again, she would cut them off. But they didn't, and Luca began to relax and seek out the locations of her friends and family.

Yet the sheer volume of data being transmitted, and the limitations of the new neural lace, made it difficult for her identify and utilize the protocols. But as her skill and confidence increased, the cacophony of data began to resolve into distinct rhythms, one of which was the city's surveillance system. She dove in.

Visual data danced across Luca's inner eye: scenes of the city, the streets, the parks, the cafes. All were abuzz with people out and about, a palpable air of anticipation building for the 3D lightshow in the city's primary dome later this evening.

She sifted through the multitude of feeds, seeking out those that centered on the villa complex where she had spent the first night on Mars. But being a highly secure private facility, there were no feeds coming from within. She would have to go deeper and try and gain access through the comms network, seek out an audio signal.

It was then that she sensed another entity in the system. She couldn't be sure, since the neural lace did not have the fidelity for such forensic investigation, but she knew the telltale signature—she had sensed it before. There was another node-runner in the system.

For an instant, Luca froze. Her old fears came flooding back, paralyzing her. She retreated from the data-stream and took a moment to get a grip. Was she mistaken? Perhaps it was Aria? But no, in her heart she knew the data signal had the unmistakable cadence of human interaction. If what she had just sensed really was a node-runner, then that meant they were here, somewhere close. And it also meant there was nowhere safe from the relentless pursuit of the VanHeilding Corporation.

Luca deactivated the neural lace, removed it from her head, and flung it on the desk. A deep feeling of despair washed over her. She put her head in her hands and wept for the loss of her brief moment

of contentment here at the institute. She had thought she was safe, thought she was free, but now, in an instant, it turned out to be yet another lie. There would be no escape. At best, all she could do was try and stay one step ahead.

She wiped her face with her hands, took a breath, and picked up the neural lace again. She needed to warn her family. She activated the device and entered the data-stream one more time.

THE FESTIVAL OF LIGHTS

“You’re leaving? So soon?” said Scott on hearing Dr. Stephanie Rayman’s announcement. They had left the confines of the villa complex and ventured into the city to experience the famous Festival of Lights. This evening would be the main event, a spectacular, immersive 3D lightshow taking place in the massive central dome—the city’s cultural and social heart.

The dome was a five-hundred-meter diameter open space, bounded on all sides by cafes, bars, eateries, and a multitude of tourist traps where expensive trinkets could be purchased to remember your trip to the Red Planet. The central concourse was thronged with people, some standing, some sitting on the floor in groups, all waiting for the spectacle to begin.

Scott, Miranda, Steph, and Cyrus had taken up residence around a table outside a cafe-bar that afforded them an excellent view. They had just given their order to a service droid when Steph announced that she was leaving for Earth in two sols.

“I have to take that ship. The transfer window will close soon, Mars and Earth will be too far apart, and that means no more commercial flights for several months.”

Cyrus glanced around. “There are worse places to be stuck for a few months.”

“Yeah, I know, but I need to get back to reality. I do have a life outside of being shot at.”

“I wish Luca were here—to see you before you go.” Miranda had taken Luca’s sudden departure over to the science institute with Xenon very hard. Her initial reaction was to chase after her, bring her back. But Scott dissuaded her, arguing that Luca was perfectly safe there, probably safer than anywhere else, and that she was entitled to live her life however she wanted. Needless to say, this did not go down very well with Miranda, and an argument ensued. Eventually, when all the accumulated frustrations of the past few months had finally be expunged, they agreed that maybe what they needed to do was to chill out and enjoy their new surroundings.

Luca would show up again when she was good and ready.

“I’m sure we’ll catch up soon. Maybe on a call from the ship on the way home.”

Miranda nodded. “Gonna miss you, Steph.”

“Now don’t get all sloppy on me. I’m not gone yet.”

There was a noticeable change in the mood of the crowd. The background chatter began dialing down to a murmur. The show was about to begin.

The illumination in the vast domed space dimmed until they were almost in complete darkness, and the crowd became silent. High above, at the apex of the dome, a bright, incandescent ball of light appeared. It slowly grew in size as a deep, sonorous voice began a narration.

“Before the beginning, there was darkness—then there was light.”

With that, the bright ball of light exploded into a billion stars radiating out to fill the entire space. The crowd let out a collective exclamation of amazement. Scott reached up and tried to grab one of the tiny stars that floated just above his head, but only grabbed air instead.

Interspersed within this galaxy of stars, multicolored nebulae began to form, blossoming out of the darkness and bathing the assembled onlookers in a rainbow of colors. The star field slowly rotated as the narrator announced, “Let us embark on a journey. A journey through the center of the universe.”

The star field moved as if the assembled crowd were traveling through it, picking up speed, until each star was now a streak of light, flashing past at incredible speed. Again, the onlookers gasped in wonder.

“Wow,” said Cyrus. “Now that’s something you don’t see every sol.”

The headlong rush through the universe slowed and zeroed in on a spiral galaxy, then moved through the stars to an alien solar system, visiting each of its exotic planets one by one. The show then moved on farther, visiting quasars, pulsars, blazars, and even black holes.

Around two hours later, the show ended as it had begun—in a blaze of light, leaving a small cluster of stars nesting high up in the dome roof. The crowd cheered and clapped and then settled into riotous chatter as the lights came up.

“That was incredible.” Miranda was still shaking her head in amazement, glancing up at the dome roof to see the last of the stars. She seemed genuinely happy, and Scott could feel the tension of the last few months draining out of him. He smiled back at her and found her giving him a look, one he had not seen in a long time. She shifted in her seat and moved a little closer, then wrapped an arm around his shoulder. Scott instinctively reached around to the small of her back, and before his mind had time to ruin the moment, they kissed, and the outside world disappeared.

When they finally pulled apart, Scott could sense an awkward silence from across the table. He glanced over.

“Hallelujah.” Steph raised her glass in a mock toast and downed her drink in one go. “I was wondering how long it would take for you guys to park all the bullshit.”

Scott laughed. Miranda grinned.

“Say, Cyrus?” Steph elbowed the engineer in the ribs. “Weren’t you going to show me some amazing Mars artifact in some place here on the plaza?”

Cyrus looked a little confused. Steph elbowed him again.

“Oh, yeah...that’s right. Eh...I think it’s quite near here.” He pointed off in the distance, over the heads of the crowd.

Steph got to her feet. “Come on then, better show me now or I won’t get the chance again.” She turned to Scott and Miranda and gave a wink. “See you when I see you.”

Scott didn’t protest this exit, even though Steph was making it perfectly clear what she was up to. Miranda gripped him tighter. He turned back to gaze at her. No words were needed.

But the moment was cut short as Miranda suddenly untangled herself and tapped the side of her temple to activate her comms. She looked up at Scott, wide-eyed. “It’s Luca.”

Scott sighed, inwardly. He was happy she was making contact, but less so about her timing. “What’s she saying?”

Miranda jerked a hand up to silence him, concentrating on the call. “Are you sure? When? Goddamnit, just when I thought this crap was over. Okay, okay, I got it. Fine, we’re fine.” The call ended, and she looked over at Scott.

Scott raised his eyebrows in a question. “So?”

“She thinks there are node-runners here...on Mars, possibly in the city.”

“I don’t believe it. How is that even possible?”

“I don’t know, but she seems pretty convinced. Anyway, we’re not safe here, out in the open. We need to get back to the villa complex.”

“Better let Cyrus and Steph know.” Scott glanced in the direction they had taken.

“Yeah.” She gave him an apologetic grin. “Bad timing, eh?”

Scott smiled and gently pulled her close. “Oh, I don’t know. I was wondering how I was going to get you back to my place.”

EASY TARGET

After Sebastian VanHeilding's ship had landed and César had given them the all-clear, they transferred into the ship's rover, a well-appointed, six-wheeled vehicle designed, like the rest of the craft, for luxury and comfort. Aaron Judge, his head of security, took the helm alongside Sebastian. César sat in the main cabin flanked by three security crew. They carried light, non-lethal plasma weapons. Anything more purposeful was forbidden in the city, and there was no point in taking the risk, since they were not planning on needing such force. This would be quick and quiet, with no unnecessary drama.

However, the terrain was more unforgiving than they had initially thought, so it was hard and slow-going. It took them nearly an hour before they finally managed to find their way onto the main highway. After that they made good time, slowed down only by the increased volume of traffic entering the city for the festival.

But they could only go so far by surface rover, since such vehicles were not allowed inside the city due to the risk of contamination. Once they reached the city's western gate, they would have to leave the rover in one of the vast underground parks and then rely on Jezero's own autonomous transport pod network.

The first test of their newfound identities came as they approached the western city gate. Here, all vehicles were scanned, identified, and issued a parking designation—this they could not avoid. César sat in the main cabin, jacked-in, eyes rolled back inside his head. He was scanning the data-stream, making sure their digital deception held up. But they passed through without incident. Sebastian took this to be a good omen: the plan was working, the prize would soon be his.

Once safely inside the city, the node-runner commandeered a transport pod, keeping it off-grid and under his control. Sebastian now watched the city slip by through the side window. It was taking them to a mothballed VanHeilding Corporation facility in an

old industrial sector of Jezero. That area would be completely deserted now, especially with everyone at the festival, so it was a perfect place to establish a base of operations.

Outside, the city lights swept past, bathing the interior of the pod in garish pinks and purples. The people all seemed to be moving in the same direction, lured to the center by the promise of a spectacle.

But all throughout this journey into the city, César had continued to voice his concerns that the two node-runners back on the ship were running hot. He needed to take the load off them, and soon. It would be a disaster if one were to burn out on this mission—that would be game over for Sebastian and his hopes of rising through the family ranks.

“We’re here,” Aaron announced, pointing out a set of utility doors that had scissored open in the front of a dilapidated-looking building. The pod entered in through the gap and down a short ramp to the facility’s basement entrance.

They disembarked from the pod and took an elevator to what used to be a luxury private apartment on the third floor—kept ready for the pleasure of any high-ranking family members who happened to be visiting. Now, though, it had lost most of its opulence; only a scattering of furniture remained. It did, however, have power and a functioning holo-table, giving them excellent access to the citywide network. The apartment activated automatically as they entered.

Without saying a word, César sat down on a long, low bench beside the holo-table and jacked-in to the data-stream. It was now all up to him to find her. How long that would take was anyone’s guess. But she was out there somewhere, and if anyone could find her it would be César. Sebastian had to admit, this guy was good.

With nothing to do now but wait, Sebastian opened the doors to the balcony and gazed out to the edge of the dome that housed this sector of the city. Through its translucent membrane he could make out the brightly illuminated forms of several other adjacent domes. But one stood out more than most: the great central dome that dominated the Jezero City skyline, now a kaleidoscope of color—the Festival of Lights had begun.

Eventually, after what seemed like an eternity to Sebastian, César finally spoke. “I’m getting a lock on something now.” He relayed a feed of his dive into the data-stream onto the holo-table.

Sebastian turned back inside the apartment and moved closer to the table to study the projection that now blossomed out across its surface. It was a confused mess of flashing images and garbled sounds. But it grew in clarity, culminating in a bright flash of a human face.

César suddenly pulled off the neural lace, jolting himself out of the data-stream. He was breathing hard, his face flushed.

“What? Was that her? Where is she?” Sebastian demanded.

The node-runner took a moment to get his heart rate down before attempting vocal communication. “She’s...in the data-stream.” He looked up at Sebastian and then to Aaron. “I think she sensed my presence.”

Sebastian considered this for a moment. “Are you sure it was her? Could it have been one of the node-runners from the ship, or the QI, Aria?”

“No, it was definitely a human mind, not one of us, and definitely not artificial.”

“What’s she doing in there?” Aaron’s face looked grave.

Sebastian waved a hand. “It doesn’t matter what’s she doing. What matters is where she is—physically.”

It was now César’s turn to look grave. “She’s located in the science institute, around two hundred kilometers north of the city.”

“That’s Xenon’s facility,” said Aaron, shaking his head. “We’ll never get in there without being spotted. Way too much security.”

“Damnit, we need to find a way in and get her.” Sebastian thumped the holo-table, sending a quiver through the now frozen projection. “We haven’t come all this way just to give up now.”

César shook his head. “There’s no way we can get in there and keep the ship hidden. We just don’t have the neural bandwidth for a hack of that complexity.”

“I’ve just checked with the ship.” Aaron held a hand to his temple, listening to an internal comms link. “No security alert issued on the grid. She may not know we’re here. Or if she does, she hasn’t done anything yet.”

Sebastian remained quiet for a moment, thinking. He was close, so close. There had to be a way. He turned to the node-runner again. “What’s your feeling, César? Have we been exposed?”

“Hard to say.” César stood up now. “Even if she has sensed a runner in the data-stream, that doesn’t mean she knows our location. She may think we’re still off-planet, on a ship in orbit.

Also, she seems...weak, like a novice. Again, nothing like the awesome neural power she's supposed to be."

Sebastian remained silent for a moment, looking out across the city again. "I think she's afraid and running scared. We can still do this. All we need to do is find a way to flush her out of Xenon's institute." He spun back around to the node-runner. "Can you find where the rest of her family are? We may be able to use them as leverage."

César took a long, slow breath, nodded, and jacked-in again. After several minutes, a fuzzy 3D rendering of the central plaza blossomed out from the holo-table. Four highlighted, ghostly human forms could be identified clustered around a table just at the edge of the plaza.

"There, that's them." Aaron poked a finger at the projection, then glanced over at Sebastian.

"If we could snatch one or two of her family from there," said Sebastian, waving a finger at the holo-table, "then we could offer her a deal. Their lives for hers."

Aaron examined the projection as he contemplated how exactly this could be executed. "Tricky, in such a crowded area. Too many people."

But before anyone had time to reply, two figures began to move away, leaving the plaza area. Sebastian leaned in to get a better look. "Someone's on the move."

Aaron checked the data analysis. "Looks like Dr. Stephanie Rayman and Cyrus Sanato."

"Dr. Rayman would be perfect." Sebastian stood up, looking over at Aaron. "According to Luca's profile she has a strong emotional attachment to her, almost to the point of regarding her as a surrogate mother."

"She would certainly be a much easier target," said Aaron. "The parents are fighters, especially the mother, who's highly skilled and very dangerous." He jerked a finger at the projection. "And it looks like they're leaving the central dome, heading away from the crowds." Aaron glanced back at Sebastian.

"Okay, I have an idea on how we take them quietly without a fuss." Sebastian then turned to César. "I need you to commandeer another transport pod."

TAKEDOWN

Cyrus and Steph threaded their way through the crowded plaza toward a short, broad connecting tunnel that would bring them into a sector commonly called the *cultural quarter*. It was smaller in size than the main plaza, but more architecturally impressive since it was home to museums, galleries, theaters, and well as the more upmarket bars and cafes.

“So where is this...thing you’re taking me to see?” Steph seemed a little dismissive of the quest they were currently embarking on.

“Not far.” He gestured ahead at a futuristic building that looked as if it had been grown from some organic compound—which to some extent, it had. “At the festival exhibition building. The one that looks like an internal organ.” He glanced back at Steph. “Actually, I didn’t think you were all that interested in seeing it.”

“I’m not. I just wanted to give the others some space.”

“Oh.” Cyrus sounded disappointed. “What for?”

“Seriously, Cyrus, you need to get out more. Did you not see they were having a moment, burying the hatchet, putting the past to rest—whatever you want to call it.”

“You mean, getting back together?”

“Yeah.”

“Jeez, Steph, what do you take me for? Of course I saw it.” He tapped his optical visor. “You forget, I can see in infrared, and their temperature was definitely rising.”

He stopped suddenly, bringing his hand to the side of his temple and gesturing to Steph to wait up. “Scott,” he said. “Yeah...what? You serious... For real? Okay, okay, will do.” He signed off and looked at Steph. “Luca has made contact with Miranda.”

“Good. Is she coming to the festival?”

“No. Apparently she jacked-in to the data-stream and...well, she thinks there might be a node-runner snooping around.”

“What, here in Jezero?”

“She’s not sure. Possibly. But Scott seems to be taking it seriously. He says we should head back to the villa complex.”

“Screw that. I’m fed up running scared of those ghosts. I’m not spending my last few sols in Jezero hiding away. Let’s just keep going. We can go back later.”

Cyrus thought about this for a moment, then nodded. “Yeah, I’m sure it’s just Miranda being paranoid.”

They continued walking until they came under a high portico that covered the entrance to the exhibition. The crowd had thinned out quite a bit and they found it much easier to move through this area. As they entered the exhibition, Cyrus spent a moment studying an information screen, figuring out exactly where the artifact was located. They then weaved their way through many decades of Martian history until they arrived at a section dedicated to the very earliest examples of humanity’s efforts to explore the planet.

“Here it is,” Cyrus finally announced as he came to halt in front of an ancient-looking chunk of space technology around a meter and a half in diameter, with four open flaps like the petals of a flower.

Steph glanced at this lump of prehistoric metal with mild interest. “So what is it?”

“That, my dear Steph, is the very first human-made object to successfully land on Mars. In fact, on any planet—way back in the mid-twentieth century.”

Steph leaned in a little to examine the artifact. “Humble beginnings. Well, we’ve certainly come a long way from that. Hard to believe it was capable of doing much of anything.” She shifted her gaze to the conveniently placed information screen. “Mars 3 Lander,” she read out loud. “I assume the previous two crashed and burned.”

“Something like that. Although this one only survived for around a hundred seconds. It sent back one gray, fuzzy image, no details.”

Steph finished reading the information panel on the Mars 3 Lander, then glanced around the rest of the exhibition space. “Anything else of interest?”

“Sure, lots. Come, let me give you the guided tour.”

For much of the next hour, the two wandered through the history of Mars colonization before Steph had finally had enough of space junk. They left the exhibition center and headed outside, where they managed to grab an autonomous transport pod—which,

as luck would have it, arrived right in front of them just as they were leaving. They clambered in, set the destination for the villa complex, and sat back watching the city slide by.

Ten minutes into the journey, the transport pod unexpectedly started to glitch, then it shut down completely. Cyrus was first to react, stabbing at the user screen. This seemed to work, as the pod booted up and started moving again.

“What was that about?” Steph said, more as a question to herself.

Cyrus was studying the transport pod’s interface screen, stabbing at it a few times with a finger.

Steph finally sensed from his body language that something might be wrong. “What is it?”

“I think this pod has been hacked. We’re taking a different route.” He glanced out the side window. Then tried the door. “Shit, we’re locked in.”

Steph tried her side. No joy. She glanced back at Cyrus. “Can’t you do something?”

“I’m trying.” He began to disassemble the door panel. “If I can get this off, maybe I can bypass the locking mechanism.”

But Steph had her own plan. She reached into a pocket in her jacket and pulled out a souvenir she had purchased at the exhibition: a die-cast miniature replica of the Mars 3 Lander. She slammed the pointed end at the side window, and succeeded only in hurting her wrist. It barely made a scratch.

“That window is quartz. You won’t break it with that,” Cyrus informed her.

“How the hell are people supposed to get out of here if they’re in a crash?” Steph fished out her comms unit and tried to get a connection—but also no joy. “Damnit, no comms. Can you get anything?”

“No, nothing. We’re being jammed.”

The pod began to slow down, veer off the main transport route, and down a dim and deserted slipway. They exchanged a glance. Steph picked up the souvenir and gripped it tight. It might not break the window, but it could put a big dent in a human skull.

“Where is it taking us?” Steph leaned over to examine the pod’s user interface.

“Looks like we’re heading toward the western gate. That’s a

terminus—it can't go any farther than that.”

Cyrus continued to disassemble the door panel while Steph watched anxiously as the transport pod treaded its way through the vast rover park for that sector of Jezero City.

The pod finally came to a halt in a deserted sector of the park. They both exchanged glances. Steph held the makeshift weapon tight as the side doors of the pod hissed open to reveal several plasma pistols pointed in their direction.

“Out,” a voice commended.

“Who the hell are you?” Cyrus ventured as he stepped cautiously out of the transport pod.

“Someone who’s going to do you damage if you don’t do exactly as I say.”

“Go screw yourself.” Steph was not going to be as obliging as Cyrus. She sat in the pod and refused to budge.

“Get her out of there,” the voice commanded again, and Steph found herself being grabbed by one of the gang. She swung the heavy metal souvenir she had concealed in her fist as hard as she could at the assailant’s temple. He let out a yelp, released his grip on her, and staggered back a step as Steph tried to grab his weapon. But she wasn’t fast enough and took a plasma blast to the chest for her efforts.

“Steph,” Cyrus shouted, and tried to move back inside the pod to check on her. He was then hit by a plasma blast between the shoulder blades.

ULTIMATUM

Miranda held a hand to her temple as she tried, yet again, to make contact with either Cyrus or Steph. She looked over at Scott and shook her head. “Still nothing.”

“They could just be somewhere with a bad signal,” offered Scott.

“This is Jezero City, not some outback asteroid—they don’t have bad signals. Something’s happened to them. I’m sure of it.”

By now Scott was beginning to agree with Miranda’s assessment. He had learned the hard way never to underestimate the uncanny prescience of her paranoia. While Luca’s message had got him a little rattled, he hadn’t regarded it as a real threat. But now he was beginning to think that Luca may have stumbled onto something that had been in the works for a while. Yet, it had only been a few hours since they’d left the festival, so it wasn’t time to panic just yet.

“Let’s give it another hour. If we still hear nothing, then that’s the time to think about calling it in.”

Miranda glared at him, then reluctantly nodded. “Okay, one hour, no more.”

Scott sighed. “Want a coffee? Looks like we’re not getting any sleep for a while.”

“No, I’m good.”

Scott moved back into the villa from the central courtyard where they had been sitting and waiting. He tapped the button on the coffee machine and placed a cup under the spout. As he waited, his slate pinged an alert.

Finally, he thought. *That will be Cyrus, I bet. I probably won’t need that coffee after all.* He fished the slate out of his pocket and glanced at the screen—it wasn’t Cyrus, nor was it Steph. It was an old-school text dump from an anonymous source. He waved a hand over the slate to read it.

If you wish to see Cyrus Sanato and Dr. Stephanie Rayman alive again, then have Luca VanHeilding be at these coordinates in two hours—alone

(18.4738N, 71.2168W), and await further instructions.

If we find anyone else with her or if the Martian authorities are alerted, then your friends die. Any deviation from the above instructions will result in the same outcome—your friends die. You have two hours.

Scott tried to interrogate the message source, but there was none. It was as if it just materialized on his slate, out of nowhere. “Miranda!” he called out. “You’d better take a look at this.”

She rushed in from the courtyard, sensing Scott’s urgency. He slid the slate to her across the counter. Miranda sat on a high stool and read it, not saying a word. “Goddamnit, I knew something had happened.” She looked over at Scott. “Does Luca know?”

Scott returned her look for a beat as he thought about the message. “Good question. Why send it to me?” He snapped his fingers. “Unless they can’t reach her directly.” He grabbed the slate, placed it flat on the countertop, and gestured over the screen to initiate a comms link with Luca.

A few seconds later, a 3D image of Luca’s head and shoulders blossomed out from the screen. She looked very agitated.

“I’ve just received an old-school text message,” said Scott. “I’ve sent it on to you. You’d better read it.”

They watched as Luca’s face became ever more distraught as she read the message. “I told you they were here,” she finally said. “Why didn’t you believe me? You should have warned Steph and Cyrus.”

“We did warn them,” Scott shot back. “But they went wandering off. Steph wanted Cyrus to show her the colonization exhibition.”

“I think it’s best that we don’t concede to their demands,” Miranda interjected. “We need to alert Aria and get some people on this. They will find them.”

“No way. If you do that, all that will happen is Steph and Cyrus die.” Luca became more animated.

“But what other choice do we have?” Miranda reasoned.

“There may be another way. I could...” Luca’s sentence trailed off, leaving Scott and Miranda hanging.

“Could what? Hand yourself over? Not a good plan, Luca.” Miranda shook her head.

“No, I mean...I could try and find them first.”

Scott and Miranda exchanged a glance. “How you going to do that, given the time available? They could be anywhere.”

“By doing what I do—jacking-in to the grid. And they’ve already given me a starting point. It looks like those coordinates are for an old mining facility outside the city, not far from the western gate.”

There was a momentary silence in the conversation. Scott shifted on his feet, then gestured at Luca’s projection. “Okay, let’s say you do manage to find them. Then what?”

“Then we have options. Just give me a half-hour. If I don’t find them by then, well...” Again, she let her sentence hang, then abruptly closed the comms connection.

Luca grabbed the neural lace off the desk and was just about to place it on her head when a thought struck her. *Should I inform Xenon—now, before I waste time trawling through the data-stream?* But that too would be time-wasting, having to explain the situation and persuading him not to do anything rash. It was bad enough arguing with her parents. *No time*, she decided. *Best get going and hope I have what it takes.* She jacked-in.

If Steph and Cyrus were at the colonization exhibition, then that was the best place to start. She burst out from the institute’s narrow bandwidth confines and into the data chaos of Jezero City, making a beeline for the exhibition center’s data-stack. She dug down through layer upon layer of historical data-dumps, seeking out anything with a timestamp for an hour or so ago, then began scrubbing through the video feeds until eventually she found them. She scrubbed forward until she thought she had lost them leaving the center. But an exterior security camera caught them entering a transport pod.

Okay, she thought, *this is good, this is good.*

The pod was autonomous, so that meant she needed to access a higher-level AI protocol, and that meant she would only be one level away from Aria—she must be careful here. The crudeness of the neural lace was also beginning to frustrate her as she tried to identify the transport systems in the cacophony of data. At this rate she would just have to take a guess, a risky move. Yet with time ticking by, she was quickly running out of options.

She tried several data-routes in quick succession until she eventually stumbled upon the right stream and followed it all the way to its source. Here it spun out into a thousand different threads, each one controlling a different set of pods. *This is going to take forever*, she thought. But she gradually narrowed it down to

only those around the exhibition center at the time Steph and Cyrus were last seen.

When she finally found it, node-runner fingerprints were all over it. They had used a quick and dirty hack to reroute it to the western gate rover park. And, as far as she could tell, it hadn't stopped at any time before that. But this was as far as she could go. She found nothing showing them getting out of the pod or where they might have gone.

Damn, she thought. *Lost them.*

Next, she tried starting from the coordinates in the message; maybe there was something she could follow there, some way to join the dots. But it turned out to be a completely derelict site, abandoned a very long time ago. Nothing there was even remotely habitable. It was a dead zone.

Yet, maybe it's not dead? she thought. *Maybe there's some structure out there that they've got functioning again?*

Still, the message did say *await further instructions*. That would suggest that this might not be the ultimate destination, just a feint to confuse the trail.

At this point Luca considered giving up. The neural lace was frustrating her, and she seemed to have come to a complete dead-end. Yet she still had some time, so she gave it one more go. She started back at the terminus of the transport pod at the western gate rover park.

Did they transfer into a surface rover? she thought. *Maybe to take them out to the mining facility—or somewhere else?*

She tried to find out what rovers, if any, had exited back out onto the surface after the pod arrived—there were several. But as she checked the ID of one particular rover, which was identified as belonging to the Yanai family, the data had a fuzzy quality to it. She suddenly realized it was under active node-runner manipulation.

"Goddamnit." She whipped the neural lace off her head and took a deep breath. *That was close*, she thought. By tracking a data point currently under node-runner control, she may have exposed herself. But she had found them. She now knew with reasonable certainty where Steph and Cyrus were. All she needed to do now was find out where that surface rover was going. But that was no simple task. If she tried to track it directly, then she would almost certainly be discovered. She had to find another way.

She slid the neural lace back on, wishing she had her old one, notwithstanding its deadly payload. But she had to make do with the tools on hand—and time was running out.

A Yanai-family rover under node-runner control, Luca mused. That doesn't make any sense. Only the VanHeilding Corporation has access to node-runners.

Rather than try and track it directly, she cross-referenced its ID and discovered that it was part of a ship's inventory—a luxury, state-of-the-art interplanetary transport. Yet when she went looking for the ship, there was no record of it landing on the planet. Even more curious, this ship was very similar to the one that had attacked them while en route to Mars.

That's when it struck her: Could it be that they were actively concealing a ship somewhere on the surface of Mars? Even masquerading as a different family in case anyone got too close? Was it even possible to accomplish such a feat right under Aria's nose? Yet the more she thought about it, the more convinced she became. It would require a team of highly skilled node-runners, but it was theoretically possible.

The revelation shocked her. The sheer audacity of it was hard to comprehend. What hope did she have in the face of such skill? With the dull instrument she was using, she would be no match for them.

Yet the lives of her friends were at stake; she had to try. So with a deep sense of trepidation, Luca tried to figure out where this rover was going without blowing her cover.

Since it was moving along the main Jezero-to-Syrtis highway, she decided her best bet was to track it by hacking into the terrestrial navigation beacon network. By doing this she would be keeping her distance; she would be several nodes removed from the runners controlling the rover.

She eventually picked it up a few kilometers outside the city and followed it heading west for a time. But at some point near Nili Fossae, she lost it—it just veered off-road and disappeared, vanishing without a trace.

“That entire area west of Jezero is full of old mining facilities, decommissioned a long time ago. Could they be using one of them? Maybe underground?” Miranda gestured at a 3D rendering of the Nili Fossae trench that blossomed out of a holo-slate in the villa complex.

It had taken Luca around twenty minutes to track down the possible whereabouts of Steph and Cyrus. But when the rover vanished, there was no point in wasting more time on the search, so she contacted Scott and Miranda and gave them an update.

“It’s possible,” said Luca over a comms link. “But my feeling is they’re actually hiding a ship out there.”

“That’s crazy,” Scott said. “How’s that even possible?”

“We should go out there and take a look. We’ve still got another ninety minutes on the clock.” Miranda looked directly at Scott, tuning in to his reaction.

He stared back at her blankly.

“It would take us fifteen minutes to get to our shuttle from here, another twenty to be over in that area,” she continued.

“If they can hide a ship from Aria, they can hide from any of the shuttle’s sensors.” Scott shook his head, dismissing the idea.

“Except for eyeballs.” Miranda gestured at the 3D map and zoomed in on the area. “If I were trying to hide a ship out there, then it would be in a high-sided valley or crater with a flat floor. And close, but not too close, to the main highway.” She leaned in and extended an index finger. “Right about there.”

“Okay, say we do find it,” Scott conceded. “Then what?” He stood upright and folded his arms.

“Then we take them out. This is a small luxury ship. There’s probably less than fifteen people on it, most of whom are probably not fighters.” She glared at Scott. “I’ve taken on ships with worse odds than this one, single-handed. It’s all about stealth.”

Scott remained silent for a moment as he contemplated the insanity of Miranda’s proposal. “Arriving in a shuttle is hardly stealthy. They’ll spot us a mile away.”

“We don’t have to land right on top of them, just somewhere close—assuming we find them. And they won’t be expecting us, they’ll just think we’re a standard shuttle flight passing over.”

“I might be able to keep you hidden,” Luca said, “but it’s tricky. The neural lace I’m using is crap—like threading a needle wearing EVA suit gloves. And the bandwidth out of here is low. But it may be possible.”

Miranda gave an expansive gesture with both hands. “Well then, are we doing this?”

A FOOLHARDY ERRAND

Luca paced around her accommodation module in the science institute and considered the intricacies of the mission they were about to embark on—mostly, all the things that could go wrong. It was typical of her mother just to dive headlong into direct action—why employ a subtle solution when hand-to-hand combat was on offer? But even if they were to be successful in rescuing Steph and Cyrus, it wouldn't end there—more attempts would be made, some other time, some other place. The VanHeilding Corporation were nothing if not relentless in their desire to have Luca all sliced up into petri dishes in one of their genetics labs.

But she had to put all this pessimistic speculation out of her head now. She had a job to do—keep Miranda's shuttle from being tracked, keep it off the grid.

Luca jacked-in.

It had taken Scott and Miranda longer than anticipated to get to the shuttle port and get the craft airborne. This suited Luca, since it gave her time to focus her mind on the task of concealing it from the network. It now flew low over the western edge of Jezero Crater, hugging the surface contours, making its way toward an area known as the Nili Fossae trench. Luca had locked on to its data signature and was working hard to keep it from leaking location packets into the city's flight control network. With the shuttle's identification beacon already deactivated, it was now hidden from all but the most forensic of data analysis.

As Luca bent her mind to the task, she realized that she was utilizing exactly the same methodology as the node-runners were using for the VanHeilding ship. *They're out there now*, she thought, embedded in the data-stream, manipulating the transmissions—and for a brief moment, Luca lost her concentration and scanned for their signatures.

She soon sensed them. Not as distinct minds within the grid, but as fleeting glimpses, like ephemeral ghosts lurking in the digital

undergrowth. She felt an urge to seek them out, confront them mind-to-mind. But that would be dangerous, not just because she would be revealing herself, but because she was not mentally strong enough anymore to take them on.

“Luca.” Miranda’s voice broke into her mind through a comms link with the shuttle. “We’re nearing the area where the rover vanished. You seeing anything?”

Luca resumed her focus. “Eh, I’ve been getting hints of node-runner activity, but I’m not risking trying to zone in on it.”

“Okay, we’re going to do a sweep of the area, heading north up along this valley. Just keep us hidden as much as you can.”

“Will do.” Luca now began to scour beacon data for this sector. Mostly it was just rover traffic on the Jezero-to-Syrtis highway along with some commercial shuttle transports, yet she began to sense gaps in the transmission noise, dropped data-packets. As she bent her mind to this anomaly, she felt the presence of node-runners again, more strongly this time. She was getting close, perhaps too close.

But Steph and Cyrus’s lives depended on the success of this mission, so she decided to give in to her urge and dig deeper. Yet she was beginning to run hot; her neural pathways were working hard to keep her footprint hidden from both Aria and the node-runners, as well as keep the shuttle stealthy. The neural lace was also compounding the issue with its limited bandwidth. But try she must, so she broke cover for a nanosecond to probe the packet data gaps, tracing the source, analyzing its nature. They were masking not just terrestrial beacon data, but orbital satellite data as well, meaning they were hiding a substantial object—a ship, parked way out in the valley.

She pulled back just as the node-runners began to sense an anomaly in the data-stream. Hopefully they had not reckoned on that anomaly being Luca.

She called the shuttle. “Miranda?”

“Yeah, go ahead.”

“I have coordinates for you. I’m pretty sure it’s where the ship is. Not far from where you are now.”

“Good work. We’ve still got another thirty-seven minutes on the clock. We can still do this.” Miranda signed off.

“There! I see it.” Scott was looking at a multispectrum feed from a

camera on the right-hand side of the shuttle's undercarriage. A ghostly, iridescent shape glowed out of the darkness as the shuttle banked.

Miranda leveled out the craft. "Okay, I'll land it over there, behind that ridge. We can EVA from there."

She took the shuttle northwest around a kilometer away and brought it down in a cloud of swirling dust, trusting that it wouldn't be seen tucked in behind the ridge.

"Luca, we've found it. Sending you some details." Scott studied the camera feeds from their flyby. "Any help on finding a way in would be great."

"I can't hack it, if that's what you're thinking," Luca replied. "Much too risky. But I'll probably be able to identify it and get you an interior schematic."

"Okay, that would help."

Miranda unstrapped her harness and headed toward the airlock, grabbing an EVA suit helmet on the way. "We'll need them to open the front door for us, and I have just the thing for that. It's worked for me so many times that I can't believe people still fall for it."

Scott checked his plasma pistol, clipped on his helmet, and stepped into the airlock beside Miranda. The outer hatch opened onto a dusty nighttime Martian surface. A canopy of dim stars overhead afforded them almost no light, so they operated using the helmet visor's night vision. Scott scanned the area looking for a route to bring them to the ship that would keep them concealed as much as possible.

"This way, I think," he said, and started off.

"Wait up. We're going to need a maintenance droid." Miranda gestured over a console on her left wrist. A hatch opened on the underside of the shuttle, deploying a squat robot onto the surface.

"What do we need that for?"

"You'll see."

They moved off, climbing toward the top of the ridge, the maintenance droid following behind on robust tracked wheels.

As they moved, Luca came back on comms, sending them details of the ship's layout. "This is all I could find. It's not the exact ship, so the interior might be a little different."

"Okay, got it," Miranda answered.

They continued on until they reached the top of the ridge. Down below, they could see the ship nestled tightly into the crater valley,

around five hundred meters away.

“I can’t believe they could get that thing onto this planet without leaving a trace.” Scott zoomed in on his visor to get a better look.

“I’m impressed with their piloting. That’s a very narrow parking spot. Anyway, let’s hope we’re right about this and Steph and Cyrus are inside.” She pointed southwest, up along the crater wall. “I think we need to approach from that side. If these schematics that Luca sent are good, then that will be in their blind spot.”

“Okay, but I still don’t get the droid.”

“You’ll see.”

They moved off again, leaving the maintenance robot behind, and circled around to the western side of the crater. Then, keeping low, they moved in on the ship. After a few tense moments, they ended up crouching under the cover on one of its massive landing struts.

“Watch.” Miranda pointed at where they had left the droid. She gestured over her wrist console and the robot began moving down the side of the ridge and onto the crater floor, kicking up a trail of dust as it went, in full view of the ship.

Scott watched this ghostly dance through his night-vision visor for a while and began to understand what Miranda was planning. Then, a source of bright illumination blossomed to his right, close to their location. He dialed down the night vision and could now see that a cargo ramp on the underside of the ship had lowered, and two crew were walking out to investigate the droid.

“Told you. It works every time. Never fails to get the door open.” She unclipped her pistol and moved forward, creeping up behind the two crew, and blasted both before they knew what hit them. “Quick, let’s get inside.”

They moved up the ramp to the airlock, and Miranda stabbed the button to open it. “According to the schematics, this should open up into a large cargo hold with a series of ancillary storage rooms on both port and starboard. That would be a good place to keep a few captives. Also, there should be an interface terminal for the ship’s network just inside the airlock door.”

Scott nodded as he unclipped his pistol. “Okay, let’s do this.”

The outer door closed and the airlock hissed as it went through its compression and decontamination cycle. Scott and Miranda took up positions on either side of the interior door, minimizing their

profiles. The door swung open and Scott peeked out, sweeping around the cargo hold, pistol held high.

“What the...” A startled crew member took a direct hit to the chest from Miranda before he could do anything stupid.

Scott continued with his visual sweep. “Clear,” he said finally, and started looking for the network interface while Miranda went to check on the downed crew member. He found it just where they said it would be and took this to be a good omen. He extracted a comms unit from a cargo pocket on the side of his EVA suit and connected it to the interface port. This would facilitate a data connection from their shuttle, hopefully providing Luca with a side-door into the ship’s systems and a way to find where Cyrus and Steph were located.

“Done,” he spoke into his comms.

“Okay, give me a minute,” Luca replied.

“Don’t take too long, we don’t have much time.”

“Then stop talking and let me figure it out.”

Scott stopped talking, looking around for Miranda instead. She had trussed up the unconscious crew member with a few zip ties and was moving back to Scott’s location. “Is she in?”

“Working on it.”

“We don’t have a lot of time.”

“I know, I know, just let her do her thing.”

They were silent for a moment. As they waited, Scott scanned the cargo bay and wondered what cameras might be hidden in the corners and alcoves—were they exposed? Had anyone spotted them yet?

Miranda was getting itchy, too. She kept her pistol high and at the ready.

Luca’s voice burst through the EVA suit comms. “Second storeroom on the port side. They’re in there, both Steph and Cyrus.”

Miranda was instantly on her feet and heading for the storerooms.

“I’ve got the security systems disabled...I think,” Luca said.

“You think?”

“It’s a strange system, multiple layers, and I’m trying not to be noticed. The node-runners have their concentration focused on exterior systems. Fortunately, they’re not monitoring the ship’s internal systems. But...”

“But what?” By now Miranda had vaporized the door lock with

a high-intensity plasma blast and kicked it open.

“Nothing, forget it,” said Luca. “Just don’t hang around too long.”

Inside, Steph and Cyrus were crouched behind a stack of empty packing crates.

“Miranda? Scott? How...” Cyrus looked from one to the other, trying to figure out how this stroke of good fortune had come about.

“No time to explain,” Scott cut him off. “Anyone injured?”

“We both took a stun blast earlier, but we’re okay.”

“Then quick, this way. There’s an EVA suit locker beside the airlock. Hurry, let’s get you out of here.” Miranda gestured for them to move.

They made their way to the locker and Scott and Miranda began pulling out suits, checking their resources as they did.

“How the heck did you find us?” Cyrus grabbed a helmet from the rack and slotted it over his head.

“Where’s Luca? Is she okay?” Steph already had her helmet attached and running through the diagnostics routine, a self-check of the suit’s integrity.

“She’s fine—she helped us find you.” But Scott was getting anxious; they were taking too long getting ready. He kept looking around the cargo bay for any sign of potential trouble.

Then it came.

The alert light on the airlock started flashing red. Someone had just entered, presumably the two crew who had gone out onto the surface to check out the droid decoy. Their tough EVA suits must have mitigated most of the energy from Miranda’s plasma weapon. Now they were back in action and probably very pissed off.

“Crap, they’re coming back.” Scott gestured at the airlock.

Miranda lifted her weapon. “So we just blast them again. Get ready.” She moved in behind some cover. Scott did likewise, his weapon trained at the airlock door. Cyrus and Steph took cover behind them.

The airlock began executing its pressurization cycle, and Scott kept his aim fixed on the door. But before it had finished its cycle, he heard an internal door opening to the cargo hold followed by the sound of heavy feet.

“Goddamnit.” Scott swung around to target the source and saw two well-armed crew coming his way. He fired off two blasts. One

hit, sending the recipient tumbling backward. The second crew member dove for cover and returned fire. A plasma bolt sailed over Scott's head just as the airlock door opened and more plasma fire headed in his direction.

"We're trapped here!" he exclaimed, firing off a few wild shots as two more crew came into the cargo bay.

"We've got to get to the airlock." Miranda's voice sounded desperate. "Focus our fire on the two in the airlock. Get it clear."

Scott shifted his position, but before he could take aim, he heard a scream from Steph. She was hit and sprawled unmoving on the floor. "Steph's down. Cyrus, you'll need to drag her to the airlock."

Miranda fired a barge of blasts into the airlock, hoping to hit someone. She broke cover, moving toward the open door, firing as she went. "Let's go, let's go...hurry."

Cyrus began hauling Steph's inert body as Scott took up a rear-guard action, firing wildly just to lay down some cover, all the time backing toward the airlock. He chanced a quick glance around at Miranda to see how far he had to move when he saw her take a direct hit to the left shoulder. She let out a scream, spun around with the impact, and collapsed on the floor.

"Miranda? Miranda?!" he called out, but there was no response.

"Drop your weapons," one of the crew shouted. "There's no way out for you."

Scott looked over at Cyrus, who returned his look with a shake of his head. The game was up. They had tried, but with two down and a multitude of plasma weapons trained on them, they were trapped with no way out.

Scott raised a free hand, lowering his weapon with the other and tossing it on the floor. The crew now began to reveal themselves, moving out from cover. One came over and kicked away Scott's fallen weapon.

"Scott," Luca's voice echoed in his helmet comms. "I'm sorry, they tricked me. I don't know how, but they knew I was in the data-stream all along. Stupid, stupid, stupid."

"What's done is done. At least we tried."

Out from behind the shadows of the cargo bay, a new figure emerged, expensively dressed with a definitive air of authority. The crew stepped aside to let him through. He strode to where Scott and Cyrus stood, giving them both a long, considered look. He then focused his attention down at the fallen figures of Miranda and

Steph.

“A foolhardy errand.” He looked back at Scott. “So unnecessary.” He gestured vaguely to one of his crew. “Check on these two, get them some medical assistance. I don’t want them to die—at least, not yet.”

He returned his attention to Scott. “Your daughter is proving to be very stubborn. All this could have been avoided if she simply complied with my request. So here’s the new deal.” He took a step forward, close enough that Scott could smell his breath. “We know she’s in the data-stream, we know everything she’s doing, every system she attempts to infiltrate. There is no escaping the mind’s eye of a master node-runner—it is futile to even try. Inform her that unless she’s physically here within the hour, on board this ship, then one of you will die, and another every fifteen minutes thereafter. If she alerts the authorities, then all of you will die. She comes alone. I don’t care how—she can walk if necessary.” He stabbed a finger in Scott’s chest. “One hour.”

He turned and addressed his crew. “Lock them up—good and tight this time.”

MARTIAN DAWN IS BREAKING

Luca ripped the neural lace from her head and flung it on the floor with such force that it broke into several pieces on impact. They had played her for the fool she was, and now everything she had ever loved was in danger of being wiped out. And even if she complied with their demands and handed herself over, there were no guarantees that they would release her family and friends unharmed. In truth, she was pretty sure they wouldn't. Yet, what choice did she have?

She had sensed their presence, the node-runners, but had grossly overestimated her own ability to stay hidden. She looked down at the now broken neural lace lying on the floor. It had failed her. Why had Xenon given her such a useless instrument? Then again, it was only intended as a tool to interface with the institute's network, not embark on a clandestine journey through the entire Jezero City data-verse.

So it had finally come to this. All the hiding, all the running, all the battles—all for nothing. They finally had her cornered, trapped, with nowhere left to go. She had been a fool to think that the VanHeilding family would ever give up and just let her live in peace. It was not their way, and certainly not that of Fredrick VanHeilding. In his mind she was, and always would be, his property—an investment that required a dividend. She was not a person, a fellow human being, she was nothing more than a genetically engineered creation—a fundamental component in his twisted grand plan. How could she ever hope to be free?

Yet, if she was to go down, then she would make damn sure she took them all down with her. And if she was going to do that, then she would need Xenon's help.

"This is an affront to Martian sovereignty, a crime that cannot be allowed to go unpunished." Luca had never imagined that Xenon could get angry. He had seemed to her the very essence of calm, like a Zen master who sees the trials and tribulations of the universe

as mere petty squabbles. But he was angry now. Sebastian VanHeilding's audacious foray into Jezero City, the kidnapping of protected citizens, and the brazen disregard for the rule of law had sent him over the edge. Luca was beginning to doubt her decision to debrief him on what had been going on right under everyone's nose.

"You can't let this get out, not yet," Luca pleaded. "If you do, they will know immediately. Such is the reach of these node-runners."

Xenon shook his head, more in exasperation than as a denial of her request.

She continued, "The very moment they notice the authorities taking any action, they're gone. They'll simply lift off and head for deep space. Nobody can catch them and they know it. As for my family, they'll be dead, or worse."

Xenon gave her a long, studious look, clearly weighing the options in his mind. "Then, tell me what you need."

"All my life, people have been protecting me. Even the QIs, for all their faults, have tried to shelter me from detection. When I tried to fight back at the battle for New World One, the toll was such that a part of my humanity was lost. I had hoped that being here, under your guidance and protection, I could reclaim that part of me. But I now realize that this is a delusion. There is only one way this ends: either I am annihilated or the VanHeilding family are completely and utterly destroyed—and their entire corporation laid to waste."

Xenon leaned forward, his voice low, his face solemn. "Be careful of what you desire, Luca, for this path will test the very limits of the humanity you so value."

"This is the path that was set for me ever since my inception. I do not have a choice—I never have."

A thin smile cracked across Xenon's face, the solemn look vanishing. "I think your training is complete. You are finally ready." He gestured over a comms unit and spoke into it. "You can come in now."

Luca glanced around to see Dr. Yastika Parween enter, carrying a small case around the size of a shoebox. She brought it over and placed it on a small table beside Xenon, who proceeded to lift the lid. "You'll probably be needing this again."

Inside, Luca could see her old neural lace along with the drone, Fly, now fully repaired. She nodded. "Yes, it's why I came to see

you now.”

“I know.” Xenon glanced up at Yastika. “We were expecting this moment, maybe not so soon, but we hoped it would come eventually. The time when you know how to truly master the power of this device.” He closed the lid of the box and gently handed it to her.

Luca took it and let it rest on her lap for a moment. “I’ll also need a rover, a fast one. Time is running out, and I have much to do.”

“Consider it done. But I would suggest not using that neural lace until you are well outside the city.”

“You mean in case the QIs decide to use the opportunity to terminate me?”

He nodded. “Just a precaution.”

Luca stood up and offered Xenon and Yastika her hand. “I think this is goodbye, and thanks for everything.”

Xenon stood to accept her hand after Yastika. “The pleasure was all mine. And should your mission prove successful, then we may very well meet again.”

Less than fifteen minutes later, Luca was heading west on the main Jezero-to-Syrtis highway at high speed. The rover they had given her was designed as a sleek personal transport, with room for five people and no more. She had also changed into a lightweight EVA suit and acquired a plasma pistol—just in case. The box sat with its lid open on the seat beside her.

Around fifteen kilometers outside the city, Luca put the transport on autopilot, then reached into the box, extracted the neural lace, and placed it gently on the base of her skull. It reacted instantly; she could feel the tendrils snaking their way across her scalp, seeking out the optimal contact points. A surge of adrenaline coursed through her body as her mind catapulted itself into an expanded data-verse. It felt good to be back.

“Hello, Luca.”

She glanced over at the seat to see Fly extract itself from the box, test its wings, and scuttle up onto the dashboard. “Hello, Fly,” she answered in her mind. “Good to have you back.”

“It is good to be back. I seem to have been inactive for quite some time.”

“Yes, I’ve been...resting. Rebuilding my strength.”

"I trust you are feeling better."

"Oh yes, much better, thank you. Tell me...is your weapon system still operational?"

"Yes. I have fourteen barbs left in the magazine."

"Good, that should help."

"Are we expecting trouble?"

"Yes, we're on a rescue mission."

"Do you require me to create an interface to the grid?"

"That won't be necessary. I've learned how to create my own connection."

"Very well, it seems your rest has done you some good."

"It has, Fly. It has."

As the transport sped on through the Martian night, Luca now bent her mind to the data-stream, seeking out Aria. It was a conversation that had to happen, sooner rather than later. Best get it over with. Her mind blossomed with a universe of data nodes, each a sub-universe in itself, worlds within worlds. She felt herself take a sharp intake of breath at the beauty of it. This was nothing like the crude instrument that Xenon had given her—this had a crystalline depth and fidelity.

A bright node began to materialize in the network and Luca focused her mind to it. It grew in form and substance, pulsating in a rainbow of incandescent color.

"You have returned, Luca," it said.

"Yes, Aria. I have returned."

"I thought you never wanted to communicate with any of our kind ever again?"

"This is true. But I see things a little differently now. I now understand what you must do, more than at any other time in the past."

The orb pulsated momentarily as if the quantum intelligence could not quite comprehend the new Luca.

"You see," she continued, "they're here, right under your very nose, and you can't even see them."

Again, the orb pulsated, this time through a confused spectrum of colors.

"Yes, that's right. You are not infallible, you are not all-knowing, all-seeing. But you knew this already."

"By they, you mean agents of the VanHeilding Corporation are

here on Mars?”

“Yes. A VanHeilding ship, the same one that attacked us en route to Mars, landed in a valley near the Nili Fossae region—completely undetected, cloaked by master node-runners. They are holding my family hostage along with Dr. Stephanie Rayman and Cyrus Sanato. Their ransom demand is that I hand myself over to them or all will be killed.”

“This is a new level of outrage by these node-runners. We must act immediately and eliminate this threat.”

“No. If you do that, then my family is dead. There’s another option.”

Luca detected a slight delay in Aria’s response, as if it was considering this alternative course of action, and more importantly, the consequences. “We cannot allow the VanHeilding Corporation to take possession of your biology, Luca. You know this.”

“I do. And I know there’s only one way out. I can’t hide anymore, I’ve tried that. Tried to find a normal life, but they’ll never let me be. So I must destroy them or be annihilated in the attempt. It’s the only way I can be free.”

“I wish there were another way, Luca. But as myself and my fellow QIs looked into the future, we could only ever see this point. And now it has arrived.”

“Have you seen what happens after?”

“No, too many variables, too many unknowns.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter now, the die is cast. It’s time to end this, one way or the other.”

Luca withdrew from Aria and began to focus her mind on the node-runners hiding the ship. The transport slowed and an alert flashed to inform her that it was leaving the highway and heading off-road. Fly shifted its position on the dashboard as the rover rocked and rolled over the rough terrain. Ahead, Luca could see the valley entrance as the landscape rose up on either side. To the east, a Martian dawn was breaking.

Luca’s rover worked its way along the valley, following the winding path of what might have been an ancient river bed in some previous eon on Mars. She kept a low profile in the data-stream, not wanting to alert the node-runners to her presence. Nevertheless, she could not help wondering if she was just fooling herself, yet again. But it was different this time; the neural lace that Athena had gifted

her on her twenty-third birthday was a far superior tool. It had a clarity and resolution way beyond anything Xenon and his team could produce. It was as if it had been designed to resonate with her own unique neural pattern. Not only could she sense the node-runners, she could almost divine their thoughts.

The rover rounded a high embankment on her left and she could now see the ship squatting on a wide, flat crater floor. It was well concealed for such a sizable vessel. As she approached the ship, her cockpit comms burst to life.

"I'm very happy that you have decide to listen to reason, Luca. Please halt your rover where it is and make your way on foot to the main cargo airlock. I will be waiting there for you. We're all so looking forward to finally meeting you."

Luca knew the voice to be that of Sebastian VanHeilding, an aspirant to the higher echelons of the family. No doubt the capture of the elusive Luca Lee-McNabb would go a long way to ensuring his rise within the family's hierarchy. Yet she breathed a slight sigh of relief, as so far they seemed to be unaware of her presence in the data-stream.

She halted the rover around a hundred meters from the ship, clipped on her EVA suit helmet, and headed out the side airlock on to the Martian surface. Fly had attached itself to her right shoulder.

"Well, Fly, it looks like we're doing this. Are you ready?"

"Of course. I am always ready."

"Good. Remember, I'm counting on you. We all are."

"I shall not let you down."

"Okay then, let's go."

BRAIN DEAD

Sebastian stood inside the cargo hold of his luxury interplanetary ship facing the inner airlock door. Several of his crew stood alongside him, weapons ready, just in case Luca tried anything stupid, which he doubted. She had been thoroughly outplayed and she knew it. Nevertheless, his insurance policy, so to speak, was a bound Scott McNabb kneeling on the floor beside him with a plasma weapon pointed at his head.

Two of his node-runners were still jacked-in up on the ship's bridge, keeping it hidden and alert to any indication that the authorities had been informed of their presence—but all was quiet. César stood close to him in the cargo hold, also jacked-in and alert to anything that Luca might try and pull.

A light flashed and the airlock control panel pinged, indicating that Luca had entered. A surge of excitement rippled through his body. He had done it. Done what Fredrick VanHeilding had failed to do all these years—he had captured the prize that would catapult him into the highest ranks of the family. As he stood there waiting for the door to open, he dared to dream of the ultimate prize: to supplant the aging patriarch, Fredrick, and become king in all but name.

The panel pinged again, a green light illuminated, and the door began to open. This was it. His moment had come. But the door had barely opened a crack when a small drone spat out from between the gap.

“What the...” Sebastian ducked as it flew over his head. He thought he heard a *phitt, phitt* sound just before the guard holding a weapon at Scott McNabb's head yelled out in pain.

Sebastian looked back at the airlock, hoping to see Luca standing there and offering some explanation for this act of stupidity—what did she hope to achieve with a tiny drone?—but the airlock was empty.

“Where the hell is she?” he shouted at César.

“Eh...I can't see her. She's nowhere outside.”

He tapped his comms. “Luca, I know you’re out there somewhere and can hear me. You have one minute to enter the airlock or the next sound you hear is your father getting his brains fried.” He turned to look over at Scott, who was on his knees, hands tied behind his back. The guard beside him readied his weapon, but he seemed sluggish.

The drone buzzed across the cargo hold again. *Phitt, phitt, phitt.* More of the crew yelped as tiny barbs embedded themselves in their flesh.

“Will somebody please shoot that thing down?” Sebastian yelled as the crew started firing in all directions, trying to bring it down. But it was too fast and agile, twisting and turning in the air above them, then disappearing into the multitude of ducting that covered the ceiling.

“Time’s up,” Sebastian spoke into his comms unit. “You had your chance, Luca.” He turned around to instruct the guard to shoot Scott, only to witness him collapse on the floor. Then another crew member collapsed, and another.

Phitt, phitt. The drone buzzed past, and for the second time since embarking on this mission, Sebastian felt as if he was losing control. “Where the hell is she?” he shouted at César again.

The node-runner shook his head. “I don’t know, I don’t know, I can’t find her.”

Another of the crew fell to the floor. The situation was getting out of hand; he needed to do something. “Everyone, out of here now. Head to the bridge.”

“What about him?” A crew member jerked the muzzle of his plasma weapon at Scott, who now had a smirk on his face as he looked Sebastian in the eye.

“Shoot him.”

But the crew member was already swaying, struggling to keep himself upright. Then he too fell to the floor. Sebastian turned and ran for the exit, along with César and one other survivor.

They burst onto the ship’s bridge, much to the surprise of the two crew members operating the helm. “Shut the doors, quickly. Do it now, before that goddamn drone gets in here.”

The bridge went into immediate lockdown as Sebastian slowly backed away from the doors. He turned to his node-runners, both of whom were still jacked-in, still hiding the ship. “Find her, all of

you. Forget cloaking the ship, it doesn't matter now. Just find her. She's out there somewhere."

"Sir, you need to take a look at this," one of the crew called out, pointing at a monitor. On it could be seen the EVA-suited figure of Luca entering the airlock. Sebastian felt a wave of relief that he finally had her where he wanted. She had given it her best shot with the drone, but it was over, and she knew it.

But as she stood inside the airlock, Luca turned her head and looked directly at the camera. It was a look that sent a wave of trepidation rippling through every fiber of his body. He shook his head, trying to dispel the unsettling feeling she had given him.

"Prepare for takeoff." He gestured at the flight commander. "Mission accomplished. Time to get off this planet."

There was a brief moment as he waited for the ship's systems to boot up. But nothing happened.

"I said prepare for takeoff. What are you waiting for?"

"Eh...we seem to have a problem. I'm not getting any response from the ship's systems."

"What?" He looked over to where the node-runners were jacked-in. Perhaps they were in the ship's data-stream, preventing it from operating on manual control. "César, go check on them, see what they're up to. Get them out of the system so we can take off."

César made his way over to where the node-runners operated. They were both strapped into specially designed reclining seats, a mess of wires trailing from their heads. But as he approached, the expression on his face changed to one of concern—one which Sebastian picked up on.

"What's the problem?"

César stood over the node-runners, scrutinizing their faces. He then turned to check the readouts on a bank of attached monitors.

"They're...brain dead." He looked over at Sebastian as the color drained from his face.

"What? They can't be. That's impossible." He looked back at the airlock monitor to see Luca stepping out into the cargo hold. She was coming for him. Of that he was now certain.

SUICIDE MISSION

Scott struggled with the ties binding his hands behind his back, trying to get them off. All around him were the motionless bodies of Sebastian VanHeilding's crew. Yet he wasn't sure how long he had, since they were just unconscious and could come around at any moment. So he wrestled frantically, trying to break free of the bonds.

He had recognized the drone when it first zoomed in. It was Fly, the one that Athena had given Luca back on Earth for her birthday. She was clearly trying to instigate some sort of a rescue, but how much could one drone do against the full complement of Sebastian's crew? Sure, there were a good few down here in the cargo hold. But he had more, and they would get that drone sooner or later.

He couldn't break the bonds, and his wrists were rubbed raw. So he rose to his feet and began to examine one of the unconscious crew, hoping to find a knife he could use. He had moved on to the second body when he heard the airlock operating. He stopped, looked over, and saw Luca stepping out. She flipped her visor up.

"Luca, am I glad to see you. Help me get these off." He gestured with his bound hands.

Luca fished a knife out of a pocket. "How are the others?" she said, slicing through the bindings.

"Cyrus is okay, Steph's taken a hit, but...Miranda, she's hurt bad." He gave her a concerned look.

"I've got a rover parked up around a hundred meters down the valley. You think you can get them out to it? Get to Jezero?"

"Possibly. Yeah, I think so." He rubbed his wrists to get some feeling back.

"Do that. Do it now. And don't wait for me."

"What? Are you crazy? We can't leave you here."

Luca placed her hand on her father's arm in a reassuring gesture. "It was only ever going to end one way," she said. "We all knew that, even if I had hoped there might be another way. But there isn't."

Scott shook his head, and was about to argue when she cut him off with a quick hand gesture.

“They want me because I’m a monster. Someone who can inflict devastation on an adversary with a single thought—given the right tools.” She tapped the base of her skull. “I messed up your mission because I wasn’t being true to who I am—who I really am. But no more, this is the beginning of the end. Either VanHeilding Corporation is destroyed or I am. There is no other way. Now go, get to Jezero, save Miranda.” She embraced him, then broke off and headed for the ship’s interior without looking back. From somewhere up above in the superstructure of the cargo hold, Luca’s drone dropped down and landed on her shoulder.

Scott hesitated for a beat and considered going after her—to persuade her to leave with him and the others and call off this suicide mission. But he knew it would be futile. This was a different Luca, one who had chosen her path, and there would be no stopping her. He was also concerned about Miranda. She had taken quite a hammering, and may not survive unless he got her to a hospital fast. He reached down and relieved two of the fallen crew of their plasma weapons. One gave a groan; he might be coming around. Scott didn’t have much time. He checked the weapon and saw it was dialed all the way up—high power, deadly. *Bastards*, he thought. *They were trying to kill us*. It was no wonder Miranda was barely clinging to life. He dialed it down to stun and shot the groaning crew member. That would keep him quiet for a while.

He found his way through the packing crates to the storage room where they were holding the others. After a moment or two, he had the door lock removed and swung it open to find that Steph had regained consciousness. She was sitting up, her back against the wall, and Cyrus sat alongside her. Miranda lay flat on her back on the floor in front of them, her face deathly pale.

“Scott!” Cyrus jumped to his feet. “Jeez, I thought you were dead. What happened?”

“Luca showed up, that’s what happened. She sent in that drone of hers and it took out around a half-dozen of the crew. The rest ran for the bridge.” Scott looked down at Miranda. “How is she?”

“Bad,” said Steph, who had also risen to her feet.

“And you?” said Scott.

“My left arm is completely numb, but I’ll live.”

“Luca has a rover parked close to the ship. She wants us to get out now, get to Jezero, get Miranda to a hospital.”

Fortunately, they were all still encased in their EVA suits, which was probably what had saved Miranda—so far.

“Helmets?” Scott asked. “Anyone know where they stored them?”

“Yeah, over there.” Cyrus gestured at a far corner of the storage room.

Scott threw him a weapon and handed another to Steph. They then gathered up the helmets.

“Where’s Luca now?” Steph asked as Scott helped her with the helmet.

“On a suicide mission.”

“What?”

“I think she’s going for the jugular. Last I saw her she was heading for the bridge with that drone of hers.”

“Goddamnit, we have to help her. She’s no match for those node-runners.” Cyrus checked his weapon.

“There was a time when I would go running after her,” said Scott. “We would all go running after her. But she doesn’t want our help anymore. She wants to end this one way or the other—so we just need to get out of the way. It’s Miranda that needs our help now.”

Scott and Cyrus carried Miranda’s limp body between them while Steph led the way through the airlock and out onto the Martian surface. After a few minutes, they were safely inside the rover. Scott started it up and was soon maneuvering it down the valley toward the main Jezero-to-Syrtis highway. Cyrus radioed ahead, informing the authorities of the situation.

Around fifteen minutes later, an ambulance shuttle landed in front of them, just off the highway, and they all transferred into it. Scott and Cyrus slumped onto a side bench as medics immediately got to work on Miranda and Steph.

Through the side window, Scott could see two military shuttles coming out from Jezero, making a beeline for the valley. He wondered if he would ever see Luca again.

A BRAVE ATTEMPT

Luca made her way to an open metal stairway that brought her up to the mezzanine deck of the cargo hold. She paused for a moment as she interrogated the ship's systems. Sebastian and the remains of the crew had barricaded themselves into the ship's bridge. With two of the node-runners now gone, there was little in her way. She had the ship in complete lockdown—there was no way Sebastian was escaping her.

Curiously, Luca could not sense the third node-runner, César, in the data-stream. Perhaps, after seeing that his comrades were now brain dead, he'd decided not to try and take her on. *A wise choice*, she thought, since the other two had been no match for her. Yet she had felt no remorse in rendering them brain dead. Before today, such actions were the soundtrack of her nightmares, the white noise of dying minds. Now, though, she felt absolutely nothing at their demise.

Is this what I have become? she thought. *Is this what I want for my future?* Maybe it would be better to end it now. All she had to do was give herself up. As soon as that happened, the QI hive mind would activate their fail-safe protocol. The antimatter within the neural lace would detonate, and everything within a half-kilometer radius would be annihilated. Game over.

But Luca's thoughts were interrupted when she sensed that the crew were trying to activate the ship's engines, preparing to take off. She needed to focus and keep that from happening until Scott had a chance to get the others off the ship. Below her in the cargo hold, she could see Steph heading into the airlock, Scott and Cyrus behind, carrying Miranda.

She waited in the shadows, her mind interfaced with the data-stream, countering every effort by Sebastian's crew to lift off. At the same time, she monitored the progress of the others as they made their way to the rover, and then down along the valley to the highway—and to safety.

"It's time," she finally said to Fly.

“Very good. Shall we begin?”

“After you.” Luca hit the button to open the entrance to the upper levels.

They made their way through the empty utility deck to an elevator that would bring them up to the bridge level. Luca’s interrogation of the ship’s systems revealed only five people were on this level. Sebastian, along with César, the last remaining node-runner, and two armed crew were locked inside the bridge. Another crew member had been posted outside the entrance door, taking cover behind some hastily arranged barricade, armed with a powerful-looking plasma weapon. For her to approach the bridge, she would have to come along a short corridor directly in the line of fire.

But if she were to go down, she’d rather it was face-to-face with a VanHeilding, not vaporized in a corridor. She had to take this guy out somehow.

She checked her weapon, and set it to max. “I need you to sneak up on that position, Fly.”

“That guard is wearing a full EVA suit, including helmet with the visor down,” said the drone. “There is no way my darts can penetrate it.”

“Then we need to find a way for him to open the visor, even for a brief moment. You could enter the air duct network somewhere on this deck, then make your way to the vent on the wall opposite the bridge entrance door. That should give you a clear shot.”

“I could, but how will you get him to open his visor?”

“Leave that to me. Just let me know when you’re in position.”

Fly took off and scuttled into the miles of ducting that wove their way throughout the ship. Luca continued on foot, reaching the bridge deck just a few moments before Fly signaled that it had reached the air vent.

Luca concentrated for a moment, seeking out the systems that populated the area around the entrance to the bridge. As she did so, she sensed César jacking-in. His wave pattern was erratic, indicative of a node-runner under extreme stress. But she ignored him, focusing all her attention back on the entrance.

Luca stood hidden and protected behind a corner. If she were to step out, she would probably be dead in an instant. She checked her weapon and got herself ready. The guard was in a rugged EVA suit, so even if she did manage to hit the target with the plasma pistol

set to max, she would probably only stun him. But that might be enough. She focused her mind, sifting through the myriad of sub-systems.

Somewhere in the undergrowth of the stream, César was trying to disentangle the blocks she had set up to prevent the ship from taking off. But he was keeping well away from a direct confrontation with her. Perhaps the sight of his two colleagues lying brain dead on the bridge made him think twice about taking her on.

Again Luca ignored him. Instead, she tunneled down to the electrical control circuitry for a strip of emergency lighting that ran along the ceiling to the right of the guard. She amped up the current flowing to it, causing the bank of lights to go *pop, pop, pop* in rapid succession. The guard jerked his head and brought his weapon around, fearing an assault. At the same time Luca stepped out, took careful aim, and fired.

An incandescent blue ball of plasma sailed down the short corridor and slammed into his helmet, enmeshing it in a frenzy of high-energy electrical arcs. He reached up and whipped it off his head as fast as possible.

Phitt, phitt. Two darts slapped into his exposed neck. He yelped, pawing at them to pull them out.

Luca stepped back behind the corner and waited. “Good work, Fly.”

“Thank you. But I need to remind you that I am all out of ammunition now.”

“That’s okay. I think I can manage from here.”

The guard slumped down onto the floor. Luca stepped out and strolled up the corridor to the entrance doors to the bridge. *This is it*, she thought. *Once I open those doors, it’s all over.*

But there was a new disturbance in the data-stream, emanating from outside the ship. Two military shuttles were landing in the valley with at least fifty troops on board. *Damnit*, she thought. *How could Aria allow them to come so close?* If she were to go through with her plan and let the QIs annihilate her, would they just see the troops as collateral damage? *They will all die—for nothing.* She couldn’t let that happen; it was unthinkable.

She paused for a moment. Maybe there was another way—a way in which she could get out of this with some humanity still intact. She reached down and picked up the fallen guard’s plasma weapon.

If she was going to do this, then she needed a more purposeful weapon than her own. Then, in her mind's eye, she accessed the camera feeds on the bridge.

Sebastian stood behind a central holo-table, two crew on either side, weapons raised and pointed at the door. César was jacked-in at one of the node-runner stations.

Luca opened a comms channel and spoke over the bridge PA. "There's nowhere to go, Sebastian, no way out. Your ship is dead in the water, your crew are decimated, and two military shuttles have just landed. Soon they'll be making an assault on your ship. So it's time to give it up and surrender."

She could see them looking around, wondering where her disembodied voice was emanating from.

Sebastian's shoulders seemed to slump, and he raised his hands in an expansive gesture. "Very well, you win. We surrender," he said, and waited for a response.

Luca was taken aback by this sudden capitulation. She had been prepared to die, and only embarked on this course of action in the hope of saving the team in the two shuttles. This now seemed like an anti-climax. Just like that, it was over.

Nevertheless, she put some steel in her voice and pressed her advantage. "Put all your weapons on the floor, near the entrance door, and move back. Oh, and tell your node-runner to jack-out unless he wants to end up like his friends."

The crew complied, and she could sense César leaving the data-stream. They all gathered together in a group behind the holo-table.

She hefted her weapon and signaled to Fly to come to her.

The drone took a moment to extract itself from the air vent, then flew over to land on her right shoulder. "It seems we have done it, Luca. They have surrendered," it said, tucking in its wings.

"Best be on the alert for any trickery, just in case." Luca overrode the control systems for the bridge entrance doors and they sliced open. She took a cautious step forward.

Sebastian gave her a broad smile and gestured to her with open arms. "Ah...so there you are. Finally, we get to meet face-to-face. What an enigma you have proven to be."

"So they tell me." Luca relaxed her stance a bit.

Sebastian began to move out from behind the holo-table.

"Get back to where you were, and don't move from there." Luca

waved her weapon at him.

He threw his arms up in the air. "Oops, sorry, my apologies." He moved back. "So, what now? Time for a cozy chat?"

"We wait until the military arrive. They'll be here shortly."

Sebastian nodded. "So what do you think of my ship?" He waved an arm around like a storekeeper presenting his wares for inspection. "Did you know," he continued without waiting for a reply from Luca, "it's the fastest ship in the entire solar system? Not to mention the most luxurious."

"It will make a nice addition to the Martian fleet since you won't be needing it anymore," said Luca.

Sebastian seemed nonplussed by this remark and continued with his list of the ship's wonders. "It's also hardened against an electromagnetic pulse strike, an EMP attack. Nasty business, that." He shook his head at the thought. "Overloading all the electronic systems with a massive pulse of energy." He patted the holo-table. "But not this ship. It can simply brush it off with ease."

Luca wondered how long she would have to listen to this crap.

"They say that an EMP strike is particularly devastating for someone who's jacked-in to the grid."

Suddenly, Luca realized what the game was. She reached up behind her skull to deactivate her neural lace—too late. She screeched with the pain as a searing, high-energy pulse exploded in her brain. Every neuron she possessed seemed to fire all at once with the energy of an exploding star, sending shock waves through every nerve ending in her body. She stumbled, dropped her weapon, and clawed at the neural lace. Luca sensed the white noise of brain death approaching. Her mind was being consumed, her body losing motor function.

Yet somehow her finger managed to find the control pad for the lace, she tapped it, and felt her mind collapse in on itself, like the formation of a black hole.

Luca's breath came in heavy, labored gasps. She felt herself clawing her way across the floor by some deep-seated evolutionary need to get away. Then a new sensation entered her consciousness—movement, but not hers. It was the ship that was moving. Now that she was no longer connected to the data-stream, they could lift off. She felt the power surge of the engines throbbing through the floor, and she started to slide as the ship lifted off and began to angle its

way upward.

Luca's uncontrolled sliding came to a halt when she hit the corridor wall. She gathered all the reserves of energy she had and sat up, with her back supported by the wall. She found herself just outside the bridge with the entrance door still open. She could see the others inside also struggling to get reoriented after the hasty takeoff.

She had blown it. She was so cocksure of her abilities that she'd never even considered there may be a very large hole in her plan—an EMP detonation. It was simple and effective, and well known to render a neural lace useless—and anyone jacked-in brain dead. It may even have nullified the fail-safe that Athena had built in. That had been her ultimate solution. If all else failed, then she would just accept annihilation and take them all down with her. Now she may not even have that option.

Yet, she wasn't brain dead. Sure, she hurt like hell but she was still *compos mentis*, having full control of her mind. Beside her on the floor, Fly twitched and jerked, reactivated itself, and buzzed its wings like it was very, very annoyed. If it was okay, then maybe the neural lace was made of stronger stuff than she realized.

The ship began to reduce acceleration, and Luca felt herself begin to float off the floor. She grabbed a handrail to stay oriented. From inside the bridge, she could see one of the crew unfasten his seat harness, pick up a weapon, and propel himself in her direction. She took a deep breath and tapped the control pad to reactivate the neural lace.

Her mind instantly went into a whiteout, but within a nanosecond she could sense it fade; it was just the dissipating energy residue from the pulse bomb. As she began to gain clarity, she looked up to see the crew member wedged between the entrance doors, pointing the weapon at her.

"Don't even think about moving."

"Is she still alive?" Sebastian called out from somewhere inside the bridge.

"Yeah, I think so," he called back over his shoulder while still keeping a close eye on Luca.

"Well then, for godsakes just shoot her."

But by now, Luca had regained access to the ship's systems, specifically those that controlled the opening and closing mechanism of the doors to the bridge. She overrode the safety

protocol and slammed them shut at full power. The guard yelped in pain and fired off a wild shot, hitting the corridor ceiling.

Luca released the doors and the guard floated momentarily in the opening. She slammed them shut again, three more times in quick succession. The final time he was nothing more than a bloodied mess.

Luca grabbed his free-floating weapon and took cover. In her mind's eye she could see Sebastian cowering behind the holo-table as he waved his last remaining guard to find and kill Luca.

She checked the weapon, then swung around and fired through the gap between the doors. The plasma blast hit the last guard directly in the face, flinging him backward with the force of the impact. He wouldn't be moving again.

Luca kept her weapon high and propelled herself past the bloodied guard in the doorway and onto the bridge. To her right, César was still jacked-in, controlling the ship—she would deal with him in a moment. “Show your face, Sebastian.”

He poked his head above the edge of the holo-table and raised a free hand. “I'm unarmed,” he whimpered.

Luca kept the weapon trained on him and jerked her head to one side of the holo-table. “Move over there where I can see you fully.”

Sebastian hesitated for a beat before complying. “Let's not do anything too hasty, Luca. Soon we'll be in orbit. We've got time to discuss things, work out an arrangement.”

The node-runner let out a groan, and Sebastian cast an anxious look in his direction.

“He's trying to take me on in the data-stream, Sebastian.” Luca's voice was calm and measured. “A brave attempt, but a foolish one I think.”

César groaned again. This time it sounded a little more agonized. Luca kept her eyes locked on Sebastian and watched as his faced morphed into one of horror, as the groans of the node-runner turned to screams—and then there was silence.

“I think it's just you and me now, Sebastian. Is there anything you'd like to talk about? You seemed quite chatty the last time we met.”

Sebastian floated mute, his mouth open, his eyes wide with fear.

“Very well. Then it's goodbye.” Luca fired, hitting him straight in the face.

He catapulted backward and slammed into one of the panoramic

viewing monitors, where his clothing caught on the broken shards and he halted.

Luca blasted him three more times, to be sure.

CONTAINMENT

A faint haze of smoke floated around the scorched skull of Sebastian VanHeilding as Luca contemplated his demise. He may be dead, but she wasn't out of the woods yet. There were still a cohort of the crew back down in the cargo hold who would be regaining consciousness soon, if they hadn't already. The curare-tipped darts that Fly used only worked for an hour or so, depending on the body mass and physiology of the victim.

Her second issue was that, with no node-runner at the helm, the ship had shut down its engines and was now out of control. And since it hadn't reached escape velocity, it would start to fall back to the planet's surface unless she could get the engines powered up again.

Finally, one of the Martian military craft that had been scrambled from Jezero had now caught up with the ship, and judging from the cacophony that Luca could hear on the ship's broadcast channel, they were not happy campers. They were assuming that, judging from the ship's erratic launch behavior, it was out of control, and were threatening to blow it to smithereens. Presumably to lessen the destruction on the planet's surface if it were to crash-land intact.

Luca let go of her weapon and focused her attention on getting the engine powered up before the ship started free-falling. But Sebastian's claim that the ship was hardened against an EMP strike had proven not entirely correct. Luca was finding gaps in the data-stream where several vital subsystems had been fried, or had yet to reboot.

In the background, she could hear the military craft issue an urgent, final warning.

Luca open a comms channel. "This is Luca Lee-McNabb. I'm in control of this ship. Hold your fire."

"Copy," came the reply. "But your ship is now in free-fall and will be destroyed unless propulsive control is reestablished immediately."

“Hold your fire... I’m working on it.”

“You have five seconds.”

“Goddamnit, just...” But Luca gave up on communicating and refocused all her energies on disentangling the corrupted mess left behind by the EMP explosion.

“Three...two...”

The engines finally reengaged, and Luca collapsed on the floor as the ship powered out of its free-fall.

“Standing down. Please bring your ship in to land at these coordinates.” He proceeded to issue a string of digits.

“Copy,” said Luca as she pulled herself up off the floor and powered up the holo-table. A 3D schematic of the proposed landing site blossomed out from its surface. It was a location east of Jezero deep in the Isidis Basin—a flat, unpopulated expanse. They were taking no chances.

Fly had also managed to reorient itself; it flew over to her and perched on the edge of the table. “My apologies, Luca, I do not wish to add to your anxieties, but I estimate the effect of my darts will be wearing off on the crew in the cargo hold imminently.”

“No worries, Fly. We’ll just keep them contained down there and let the military guys deal with that issue.”

The ship dropped slowly onto the Martian surface, whipping up a great cloud of sand and dust. Luca powered down the engines, made the ship safe, and waited. The camera feed from the cargo hold showed several of the crew trying to break out and gain access to the main deck.

Luca opened the comms channel to the Martian military craft again. “Be advised that there are a half-dozen very pissed-off crew locked up in the cargo hold, all armed with light plasma weapons set to max.”

“Copy that,” came the reply.

“If you don’t mind, I’ll let you guys deal with them. Think you can handle it?”

“Shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Good. I’ll be waiting for you up on the bridge.” She closed the channel and waited.

She watched them enter the cargo hold on the monitors. The crew surrendered without a fight—a wise choice considering the firepower that was bearing down on them. A few moments later, a

small team stepped onto the bridge. Four of them swept the area while one came forward.

“So you must be Luca?” The name patch on his suit read, *Capt. Carmichael*.

Luca nodded. “That’s me.”

“Any injuries?”

Luca shook her head. “Just a few bruises, I think.”

“Okay, we’ll have a team of medics up here in a moment to check you over. In the meantime, I’d appreciate you not moving from this spot until we do a full sweep of the ship.”

“That’s fine by me.” Luca gave him a thumbs-up.

“All clear, Captain,” one of the team shouted over.

Carmichael tapped his comms unit and spoke into it. “Good to go. You can send them up now.”

Three medics arrived. One started giving her a cursory look over while the others focused their attentions on the node-runners, who were technically still alive.

“Any head trauma?” the medic asked as she angled a pen light onto Luca’s pupils.

Luca wondered if being subjected to an EMP detonation while wearing a neural lace constituted *head trauma*. “No, I’m fine, really.”

The medic took a moment to satisfy herself, then packed up her bag. “We can give you a full checkup once we get you to the hospital.”

“Can you do me a favor?” Luca asked.

“Sure.”

“Can you check with the hospital and find out how my mother is doing, and also Dr. Rayman?”

The medic nodded, then proceeded to talk into her comms unit, nodding every now and again at the voice on the other end. “Okay, thanks.” She closed the channel and looked up at Luca. “Your mother is okay. She’ll probably need some reconstructive surgery to her shoulder, but she’ll be back in action in a few weeks. They say she has...eh, unusual genetics. Apparently she heals at an accelerated pace.”

“And Dr. Rayman?”

“Fine, some residual scarring, nothing more.”

Luca slumped down in one of the operator chairs and breathed a sigh of relief. But she couldn’t relax for long.

“Time to go,” said the medic as she watched the node-runners being wheeled out of the bridge.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

The medic looked shocked. “But you have to. We’ve got to get you to a hospital to do a full checkup.”

Before Luca could answer, the captain returned. “Come on.” He waved over to them. “What are you waiting for? Time to get out of here.” He must have seen the confused expression on the medic’s face, as he shouldered his weapon and strode over to them. “What’s the problem?”

“I’m not leaving. I’m staying here a while longer.”

“What for? The ship has been cleared. The techs will move in and make it safe.”

“Eh...they may not.” Luca stood up from the chair.

“The orders are to get everybody off the ship. That includes you, so let’s go.”

Luca stood up from the chair and squared off against the captain. “You tell your superiors that I’m not leaving this ship until I satisfy myself it’s safe—end of story. If they have a problem with that, then take it up with Aria.”

The captain glared at her for a second before seeming to back down. “Great, and here’s me thinking this was the job done.” He sighed, then tapped his comms unit, walking off the bridge as he informed his superiors of Luca’s stubbornness.

The bridge eventually emptied out of people and bodies. Luca waited, going over in her head how best to instigate her next move. Fly perched itself on the edge of the holo-table.

She had deactivated the neural lace to give her brain a rest while she could. Soon she would need all her focus, if she were to pull off her plan. On the monitors she could see the medical shuttle leaving, bringing the injured to the hospital and the dead to the morgue. New shuttles also arrived, but these were not military. Without her lace activated she could only guess their nature, but she suspected it might be an official delegation, sent to make a more diplomatic entreaty to get her to vacate the ship. Presumably they did not want to drag her off by force, not least the fact that that might be a dangerous course of action, judging by the devastation she had just delivered to its previous occupants.

Her suspicions were confirmed when Scott walked onto the bridge.

“Hi, Dad.”

He rushed over and embraced her, squeezing her tight. “Luca, I thought I would never see you again.” He released her from his grip, held her at arm’s length by the shoulders, and gave her a long, happy look. “How the hell did you pull that off?”

She tapped her temple. “I just used my brain...literally.”

Scott laughed and hugged her again.

“Did they send you to persuade me to go quietly?” Luca said once her father had finally released her.

Scott smiled and gave a shrug. “Something like that.”

“Sorry, but I have to disappoint.”

“I know that, Luca. You were never one to argue with when you got something into your head. But I told them I would try. So, what’s the plan?”

“The plan is to end this once and for all.”

Scott glanced around the bridge. “But it’s over. Sebastian is no longer a threat.”

“It’s not over, not by a long shot. And it won’t be over until Fredrick VanHeilding and his entire Corporation are destroyed.”

Scott’s eyes widened. “But...”

“I’m not saying it’s possible, I’m just saying that’s the only way it ends. That or my annihilation at the hands of the QIs—they’re not going to let me be taken.”

“The QIs? But they would never do that. They want to protect you.”

“They want to protect humanity, and my existence threatens that. And don’t tell me you didn’t realize this.”

Scott was silent for a moment as he considered what Luca was saying. “I’ve always suspected as much, considering what the quantum hive mind’s primary directive is.”

“So you know then that this only ends in one of two ways. It’s either me or the VanHeilding Corporation.”

Scott shook his head in resignation. “You want the ship, don’t you?”

Luca nodded.

“Hell, Luca, this is crazy. Taking on Sebastian and a handful of crew is one thing, but going after the entire Corporation is heading straight into the teeth of an army.”

“I know, but I’m sick of running and hiding. At least this way I get to make my own choices.”

Scott stood and looked at her for a moment, then he nodded his head and smiled. "You know, your mother is going to be very pissed off with you."

Luca laughed. "Yeah, I suppose so. But I think she'll understand. It's the only way."

"So what now?"

"I need to get all the military personnel off this ship and the area cleared."

"So you can take off?"

"Exactly. And I could use your help."

"I can't believe I'm doing this, but since there's no hope of me stopping you, I may as well. So what do you need?"

"I'm going to instigate a self-destruct."

"What?! Are you serious?"

She raised a hand. "Calm down. It's just a bluff. I will inform Captain Carmichael that the fusion reactor has gone critical, that the ship may lose plasma containment, and that it's a self-destruct protocol which has just been activated. If his technicians check it out, they'll find it to be true. My plan is to convince him that I can deactivate it, but the area needs to be cleared, just in case. You need to back me up, make him believe it's not a bluff."

Scott raised his hands in a gesture of resignation. "Okay, I'll try."

"That's all I ask."

He moved a step closer. "So this is goodbye, then?"

Luca reached in and embraced her dad. "Tell Mom I'm sorry, but it's the only way." She pulled away a little. "And tell the others thanks for everything they've done for me."

"Sure, will do."

They disentangled, and Scott took one last look at her before walking off the bridge.

Luca wiped a tear from her face, then activated the neural lace. A second or two later, klaxons blared and strobe alerts flashed throughout the ship—a warning of imminent containment failure. Luca waited and watched as all personnel were evacuated from the ship. Her ruse was working; they were buying it. A moment later, shuttles were moving off to a safe distance.

She turned to the small drone still perched on the holo-table. "Well, Fly, it looks like it's time to go."

"Are we embarking on a new adventure?"

“We are—one we may not come back from.”

The klaxons ceased, the engines powered up, and the ship took off from the planet’s surface heading for deep space.

To be continued...



* * *

BOOK 6: EMERGENCE

THE DILLON WAYSTATION

The Dillon Waystation is as close as you can possibly get to nowhere in the asteroid belt and still order a drink. Its isolation suited people like Dakota Baird and his motley crew of privateers—along with a sizable contingent of like-minded individuals who preferred to play by their own rules, far from the prying eyes of civilized society.

With the QI on Ceres long gone, opportunities for the smugglers' trade had become plentiful. A little anarchy went a long way when your business was all about slipping under the radar, doing what needed to be done, no questions asked. At least that was until the Xiang Zu Corporation decided to start a war for control over the region's resources.

"Are you in, Dak?" Jarvis, one of his crew, gestured at the chips piled up in the center of the grubby bar table, which had been fashioned from an old airlock hatch. "Too rich for you?" He cracked a smile, exposing a row of teeth reminiscent of a crater rim.

"Eh?" Dakota glanced at his cards. *Three kings, and all cards out—tricky*, he thought. There was already an ace face-up on the table. Could be very useful to someone, particularly if they happened to have a few more. He glanced around at the others, trying to divine some meaning from their body language. But all he could tell for sure was that they were mostly drunk.

"Okay, I'm feeling lucky tonight." He slid a stack of chips toward the ever-growing pot. "I'll see you and raise you twenty."

"Twenty?" Tamires was next. She tipped her head from side to side, weighing up her hand. Then let out a long sigh. "You know, maybe if we got paid from that last job I wouldn't have to gamble for my next beer." She threw in the last of her chips. "All in, I suppose."

"Say, boss." Brooker, one of the techs, looked over at Dakota. "How's that coming along? I mean, when do we get what we're owed from those Xiang Zu bastards? Been waiting a long time."

"Yeah," Aeon piped in. "We're all running on fumes. These

recent jobs pay crap.”

Dakota raised a hand. “Soon, very soon.” He gave a quick scan around the bar, checking out the collection of patrons who had gathered here tonight. He recognized many of the usual crews, but some he did not. New people had been arriving of late, many of whom were just young radicals escaping the drudgery of Belt life for the prospect of danger and excitement. But there were others that had clearly not opted for this life by choice. They were here because they had simply nowhere else to go. Their old life in the Belt had been destroyed by the growing conflict. This was the only option they had left. But they would never survive; Dakota knew this. They just didn’t have the temperament, the ruthlessness—they would all be dead within the year. In the meantime, the only person who would grow rich from all this new activity was the owner of this backwater establishment, Dillon Barr.

He had been a mercenary turned smuggler back in the day, long before the QIs started getting involved, and his past was the stuff of legend. How much was true and how much was myth really didn’t matter. What mattered was that he was so successful that other crews began to rely on him to find jobs. But what really set him apart was that he could be trusted—possibly the most valuable asset in the Belt. But he was also a masterful strategist with a keen instinct for making a buck, and saw the writing on the wall when the QI on Ceres finally went live. He chose that time to get out of the business, deciding instead to put all his energy and resources into acquiring an old decommissioned ore-processing station that was ready to be junked. He towed out to the asshole of nowhere and got busy turning it into a waystation for the crews that operated all across this sector.

Most people thought he was crazy. But they were people that didn’t really know him. They just assumed he had taken too many pills or too many plasma blasts to the head and had lost a few marbles in the process. Yet what Dillon knew was that the second-most precious thing in the Belt, after trust, was gravity. In a region where the biggest rock had barely 3% of Earth’s gravity, the population out here spent most of their time and resources finding a place to hang out that had a decent level of artificial gravity. And the old ore-processing plant that he had just acquired had a gigantic rotating torus generating a full one gee.

So, over the years, Dillon set about turning it into a place where

crews could hole up for a spell between jobs. Where they could fix their ships and equipment, replenish their supplies, and kick back for a time while they hunted down the next gig. Soon, as crews came and went, got drunk and started talking, Dillon Barr knew pretty much everything that was worth knowing in this sector of Belt space. All information flowed through Dillon—he was a clearing house of knowledge, and that proved to be worth more than even he ever imagined.

Dakota was damn sure that Dillon knew his crew were responsible for the takedown of that Mars ship a while back, and he might even know what it was they stole. That was dangerous information. There were quite a few crews in the waystation tonight who could get very upset if they were to find out what Dakota had stashed away in the cargo hold of his ship. Even more so if they knew that the client was none other than the Xiang Zu Corporation. The very people they regarded as responsible for their sudden change of career.

He turned back to the card game with his crew and leaned in over the table. “And keep it zipped.” He jerked a finger at Brooker. “Don’t say that name in here again. Not unless you want to fight your way out.”

Brooker scowled. “Just saying. We’ve been sitting on this for months. It’s time we got rid of it.”

“Yeah,” Jarvis whispered. “What’s the big hold up, anyway?”

“I said, this is not the place.” Dakota scowled. “Let’s get back to the game. Aeon, you in?”

Aeon studied her cards.

Dakota glanced over at a dimly lit alcove where Dillon held court. He was nearly always there, sitting in the same place, engaging in whispered conversations with those in the business that mattered, while two heavies stood guard, fending off any losers desperately seeking Dillon’s ear. He looked up at that very moment and caught Dakota’s eye. He nodded, smiled, and raised a glass. Dakota nodded back an acknowledgment.

“Screw it, all-in.” Aeon pushed the last remnants of her stash into the pot and slapped the table. “Time to show what you got, ladies. Dak, lay them out.”

Dakota placed a king face-up on the table, followed by another, and after a short pause for effect, another king.

Jarvis let out a groan. “Goddamnit, I had three queens.” He

threw his cards down.

“Well, well, well, what have we got here.” Aeon placed an ace down next to the one face-up on the table. Dakota knew what was coming. Then another. Three aces, he knew it. He should have folded when he had the chance. But Aeon wasn’t finished; she rubbed salt in everyone’s wounds by placing down another. “Ha-ha, four big ones, full engine burn. Aaaaand...that’s mine.” She reached across the pot with both arms and scooped it over to her.

“Jeez, Aeon. You’re buying the beer from now on, you just cleaned me out.” Tamires shook her head.

As if on cue, at the mere mention of the word beer, one of the staff approached their alcove. But before he took any orders, he moved over beside Dakota, bent down, and whispered in his ear, “Mr. Barr insists you join him for a drink.”

Dakota glanced over, but Dillon was engrossed in conversation with two people who looked more like anxious refugees than hardened mercenaries. *Is Dillon going soft?* he wondered. “Sure.” Dakota nodded.

Another round was ordered by Aeon, the waiter moved off, and all eyes around the table looked at Dakota.

“So?” said Jarvis.

“So”—he jerked his head over at Dillon’s alcove—“the great man wants a word.”

This was met with silence, interspersed with quick glances around the bar. Dakota, like his crew and everyone else within a million kilometers of this waystation, knew that Dillon was not someone who indulged in idle chat. When he invited you into his inner sanctum, it was because he wanted something, and it was never a good idea to refuse.

“Crap,” said Tamires. “I bet he knows about the—” But she was cut off by an elbow in the ribs from Jarvis.

“Don’t bloody say it, not in here.”

“Well, only one way to find out.” Dakota stood up. “Catch you later.” He strode off to meet with Dillon Barr.

Dakota felt a strange vibe in the waystation as he threaded his way over to the seat of power. With this many patrons the bar would normally be borderline manic, but not so tonight. Most had gathered in tight knots of hushed conversations in dim corners. Nobody seemed in the mood to party.

Dillon glanced up as he approached and somehow sent a silent signal to the two heavies to let him through.

“Ah...Dakota Baird, good of you to join me.” He gestured at a seat opposite.

Dillon was not alone. In fact, Dakota could never remember a time when he wasn't surrounded by a circle of minions and lackeys. Even now, there were several others skulking in the darker recess of Dillon's alcove.

Dakota sat, and cast a quick glance at the two people leaving. From their clothes and general body language, they didn't get what they came for. He jerked his head at them. “Taking on new staff? Business must be good.”

Dillon gave a wry smile, and stroked his long red beard. “Ah... there's a lot of uncertainty these days, too much chaos going on in the Belt. They all hang around here, looking for a way out.”

A waiter came with drinks; a beer for Dakota, water for Dillon. He took a sip and sat back. “Those two came with news from afar.” He jerked a thumb over one shoulder. “Refugees from Eugina. Bad things happening out there.” He waved a hand in the air. “But I'm sure a man with your connections knows all this, can smell the change in the wind.”

Dakota took a long drink, more to steady his mind than to quench his thirst. He needed to be careful with Dillon. He could draw you in with seemingly trivial banter only to pounce once you let your guard down.

“A little anarchy has always been a friend to those in our line of work, Dillon.”

“Ah...Dakota, ever the opportunist. A silver lining in every cloud, yes?”

Dakota nodded. “You could say that.”

“Yet”—Dillon shifted in his seat and focused his steely green eyes on him—“what if that cloud is the harbinger of a great storm, what then?”

“Then it's best to find a safe harbor and wait it out.”

“A wise choice.” Dillon sat back, broke off his stare, and stroked his beard again. “Tell me,” he said after a while, “do you know anything about a Mars ship that was rumbled a few months ago, over in the Eros sector?”

There it is, he thought. Dillon knew damn well it was his crew that did the job. *So, what's he after?*

“Ah...ships get knocked over all the time,” Dakota replied with as much disinterest as he could feign. “So much so that the details can get a little muddy.”

“Well let me help you. This one had a cargo of particular interest to the Xiang Zu Corporation.”

“Oh?” Dakota examined the interior of his glass.

“Yes, and rumor has it they still haven’t taken delivery of it yet.” Dillon glanced around, leaned in, and lowered his voice. “They say it was a quantum core that was stolen. One destined for the New World One habitat.” He leaned back again. “As you can imagine, that’s got a lot of people interested as to the whereabouts of this cargo.”

“Really? What sort of people?” Dakota took another drink to steady himself.

“Desperate people, Dakota.” Dillon almost spat out the words. “The worst sort. Desperate people do desperate things.” He let this hang in the air for a moment, then jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “Take those two unfortunates that were here earlier. Lost everything back on Eugina. Everything they thought was important in life, poof! Gone.” Dillon locked eyes with Dakota. “You see, they naively thought they could hold out against the Xiang Zu Corporation. Well, they were wrong. And now what they got?”

Dakota struggled to reply before Dillon spared him the misery by starting up again. “Well, I’ll tell you what they got. A rumor is what. A rumor about a magical computer that can solve all of their problems.” He held Dakota in his gaze for a moment, then shrugged and sat back. “Ah...maybe it’s just bullshit, you know—a myth, a specter. But it’s what gives them hope, keeps them going, drives them on. Desperate people, Dakota, they got nothing to lose.”

Dakota sipped his beer and took a moment. “Well, that’s fascinating, Dillon. You do have the best stories. Sorry I can’t shed any more light on this...rumor.”

Dillon nodded. “Pity.” He took a sip of his drink. “Do you know where they’re heading next?”

“Can’t say I do, Dillon. Nor do I really care.”

“Well, you should, because they’re looking to buy passage to Elektra where they’ve vowed to hold out against Xiang Zu, come what may.” He gave Dakota a considered look. “Isn’t that where your brother and family are? Surely you must be worried for them?”

Dakota felt the blood pulse in his temple, and only for the fact that weapons were banned on the waystation, he might have blown Dillon's head off. "That's no concern of yours."

Dillon raised a thin hand. "My apologies if I've touched a raw nerve. Families can be so complicated." He smiled.

Dakota downed the last of his beer and went to stand up and leave. But Dillon raised a hand.

"Sit."

He felt rough hands grab his shoulders from behind and shove him back down in the seat. Dillon leaned in, his face deadly serious. "I know you did that job on the Mars transport. I also know that you're still holding the goods. I don't know where you have it stashed, but even if I did, rest assured, I want no part of it. Because it's a poisoned chalice, Dakota. Ready to bring hell down on anyone who has it."

Dakota said nothing. What was there to say?

"Now you and me, we go back a long way, back to the early days. And it's out of respect for you that I'll keep this our little secret. But I want you off this waystation, right now. Your crew have already been shown the door. They're waiting for you on your ship. I want you as far away from here as possible." He paused to let this sink in. "But as a parting gift, let me give you some advice. Like I said, a storm is coming, but this one has no safe harbors, it only has sides, Dakota. Best make sure you're on the right one when it breaks."

He nodded to his goons. "Get him the hell out of here."

LIFE GETS COMPLICATED

Dakota arrived onto his ship to face a confused and angry crew.

“What the hell is going on, boss? Why are we getting booted off the waystation?”

Dakota moved purposefully toward the bridge to check on the ship’s readiness to undock and depart. “He knows we did the Mars transport job a while back, and has a good idea of what we stole. He’s afraid we’ll attract too much heat if we stay here.”

“Then we need to get rid of it, make the handover,” said Brooker. “Why is it taking so long?”

“The situation in the Belt is volatile at the moment.” Dakota waved a hand in the air. “It’s very difficult to arrange a safe rendezvous.”

“That’s bullshit.” Kendrix barged his way through to the front of the assembled crew, a few of his comrades close behind. He was the second-in-command and not someone Dakota could brush off with the wave of a hand.

Kendrix turned around to face the rest of the crew. “We should have gotten rid of this thing a long time ago, but Dakota here’s been stalling, haven’t you?” He turned back and jabbed a finger at the captain.

Dakota now had his entire crew of thirty-seven angry and desperate people looking at him with expectant faces. The situation was getting delicate; he needed to calm things down and not let Kendrix get everyone riled up.

Dakota raised a hand to quiet the muttering. “This is my ship, that means we do things my way, and my way has kept you all alive. Nobody has died for well over a year. We play smart and that keeps us all alive.” The muttering died down. He looked them in the eye, from one to the other. “And if you don’t like that arrangement, then”—he jerked a thumb toward the bridge door—“you can leave now and try and pick up a job with another crew. One that’s probably going to use you as cannon fodder.”

There was a moment of silent reflection from the crew. But

Kendrix wasn't backing down. "All very noble of you, Dakota. But we pulled off the richest job in years and we've still got nothing to show for it."

He turned around to face the rest of the crew. "Want to know the real reason why?" He let the question hang in the air. "Well, while all you lot were off getting drunk and gambling away the last of your money, I was taking a look back through our communications logs."

Dakota sensed that this could get ugly. He slowly reached around to the base of his spine to his plasma pistol, hoping no one would notice, and flicked off the safety.

"And this is what I found." Kendrix nodded to one of his comrades, and the holo-table in the center of the bridge flickered to life. A full-body 3D image of Lui Wei, governor of Neo City and high-ranking member of the Xiang Zu family, blossomed to life. He spoke.

"Captain Baird, I'm extremely disappointed in the manner in which you choose to conduct your business. We had an understanding on the contract price, which we both agreed was generous compensation for the task, but now you choose to renegotiate. I should have known better than to put my faith in the integrity of a bunch of low-life mercenary scumbags such as you and your crew."

Lui Wei's voice was one of restrained anger. He paused for a beat, then sighed. "So, let me be clear. The agreed price stands, there will be no renegotiation, and the goods are to be handed over within the next seven Earth-days. Failure to comply will bring hell and fury down upon your heads. We will hunt you down to the ends of the solar system, eliminate you and your crew, and take back what is rightfully ours. You have been warned. You have seven days."

The holo-table flickered off, and the bridge went silent.

"That was fourteen days ago," Kendrix announced with a flourish. "That's why Dillon wants us off his waystation. Word is out. Soon everyone in the system will be gunning for us."

"What the hell, Captain?" Aeon screeched. "Is this for real?"

Again, Dakota raised a hand to calm the crew's increasing jitters. "I'm just trying to get us a better deal. Get us all a bigger payday." But as he looked into their faces, he could see that they weren't buying it, and that life might be about to get a lot more

complicated.

“Why should we believe you?” Jarvis shouted out. “Xiang Zu already agreed to a great deal but you’re still stalling. Far from keeping us all safe and getting us more money, you’ve just put a bounty on all our heads.”

“Captain, say this isn’t true,” Tamires implored.

Dakota felt for the weapon in his belt, but before he could reach it a pair of Kendrix’s buddies grabbed him from behind, relieved him of his plasma pistol, and twisted his arms behind his back.

Kendrix stepped forward. “We’re relieving you of command of this ship.”

This caused consternation amongst the crew. Dakota could sense there were those loyal to him ready to put up a fight. But he knew no good would come of it, so he decided to come clean.

He turned to face Kendrix. “It’s true, I’m stalling. And you’re right, I’m putting everyone in danger.” He could hear the shock rippling through the crew. “But hear me out. You owe me that.”

“Enough,” Kendrix shouted.

“Hold on.” Aeon cocked her head at the captain. “Let’s hear what he has to say.”

Dakota scanned their faces. He knew them all; they’d been on many jobs together. He also knew that some wouldn’t understand what he was about to say, and others simply wouldn’t care. But he still owed the rest of them an explanation.

“I was more than happy to deliver the cargo to Xiang Zu and get paid. But that was before they attacked Eugina and killed over two hundred people.” Dakota looked angry. “These were just ordinary people trying to stop their livelihoods being taken away. Now the Xiang Zu Corporation are gearing up for an attack on Elektra.” Dakota paused and took a deep breath. “So, I started having doubts about what we’re doing by giving them this thing, this quantum core.”

“Yeah, well you can bore some drunk at the bar with your sob story,” Kendrix butted in. “Get him off this ship before they undock us.”

Dakota felt a push in the back and he was bundled toward the bridge door. His crew looked at him with a mix of pity and disdain. He had let them down and he knew it. But before he got halfway across the bridge, the ship jolted as the Dillon Waystation released it from the docking port.

“Those bastards, they’re pushing us off the station.” Booker pushed himself over to one of the bridge consoles.

Kendrix swung into action, clearly relishing his opportunity to take command. “Quick, get the maneuvering thrusters powered up, take us out past the navigation beacons, out into free space.”

“Aye, aye...eh, Captain,” Brooker replied.

Kendrix gave a broad, satisfied smile. “That’s right, and as your new captain, the first thing I’m going to do is open a comms channel with Lui Wei and see if we can smooth things over. We’re going to deliver this quantum core and get paid.”

“What about Dakota?” said Jarvis. “We’re too late to get him off the ship.”

“Lock him up in the cargo hold. He can contemplate his poor choices while we get back to the business of getting rich.”

DEEPEST SECRETS

After leaving Mars orbit, the luxury interplanetary ship *Daedalus* burned hard for over forty hours on a trajectory that would ultimately take it into Belt space. Luca Lee-McNabb was testing the limits of its former owner's claim—that it was the fastest ship in the system—by pushing it to the absolute maximum. But how fast an interplanetary ship can accelerate is limited not just by the physics of its propulsion design, but also by the limits of the human body to endure intense and sustained gee forces. For someone young and genetically enhanced like Luca, this turned out to be quite a lot. Nevertheless, after forty hours of constant acceleration, even she was beginning to weary of the physical strain she was putting herself under.

Her headlong rush through deep space was fueled more by her anger than by high-energy plasma propulsion. But anger is a fuel with a short half-life; the initial explosive burst dissipates rapidly. Now, all these hours later, Luca's anger was ebbing away, morphing into a simple determination to seek revenge—a less explosive fuel, and one more sustainable over the long term.

She shut down the engines and let the ship coast through space. With the gee forces acting on her body now dissipated, she finally fell into a long, deep sleep. When she awoke some ten hours later, she felt revitalized both physically and mentally.

She was tempted to put her neural-lace back on and check on the status of the ship, but since taking it off shortly after initiating the departure from Mars orbit, she had enjoyed the peace and quiet. The constant buzz of data had ceased, her mind had become more relaxed now that it didn't have to deal with a multitude of external stimuli. So, she resisted the temptation—after all, the ship knew where it was going and required little or no input from her. She did miss the dialogue with the drone, *Fly*. But that was a small price to pay for the rare luxury of some mental downtime. With her body now free of the physical strains of rapid acceleration and her mind free of extraneous data noise, over the next few days of her journey,

Luca got to thinking.

Her mad dash out to the asteroid belt was driven by one singular motivation: to eliminate Fredrick VanHeilding or die in the attempt. But the more she thought about it—here in the vast expanse of space, with time stretching out before her—the more she began to consider that this might not be enough.

Assuming she managed to pull off the not-insignificant feat of killing Fredrick VanHeilding, all she would really achieve would be to create a vacancy at the top for some other, equally maniacal member of the family to take that position—and normal operations would simply resume. The more Luca reflected on her run-ins with Sebastian VanHeilding on Mars, the more convinced she was that the family probably had a surfeit of egomaniacs all ready and willing to claim the mantle of the primary patriarch and continue in their pursuit of system-wide domination.

And what of the other families? she considered. *Xiang Zu, Sicon Industries, The Wanata Consortium, and the rest of the bunch?* All, in one way or another, hell-bent on undermining the dominion of the QIs and returning human civilization back to a medieval feudal system where the rulers lived forever in wealth and power while everyone else simply existed to serve their egos.

For the next few days of her journey, Luca battled with these weighty sociological thoughts, edging her mind evermore toward hopelessness as she contemplated the near impossibility of combating such powerful enemies. If the quantum intelligence hive-mind that had maintained harmony throughout the system for over two decades now found itself under threat from these same forces, then what hope did she have? She was just one person. What could she realistically do to hold back the tide of chaos, even with all her supposed neural skills? It was, in her mind, the beginning of the decline of human civilization. A decline that was gaining speed with a momentum far beyond her ability to influence.

And so, Luca started to doubt her desire to seek revenge. It would have no more effect than chopping the head off a multiheaded hydra—more would grow back, nothing would change. She found herself becoming ever more despondent. Her desire for mental rest and recuperation was proving to be elusive, undermined by her own pessimistic thoughts. She grew weary of the turmoil in her head and needed a distraction, so on the fifth day

out from Mars, she extracted the neural-lace from its case and fitted it onto the base of her skull.

She was instantly assailed by a cacophony of data from the ship's systems. Since none of it required her immediate attention, she pushed it to the back of her mind where it became nothing more than a low-grade murmur. Luca reached into the case again, and this time extracted the drone, Fly. She activated it.

The little machine unfolded its delicate wings, which buzzed and fluttered for a brief moment before it flew up and came to rest on the edge of the main holo-table on the ship's bridge. "Hello, Luca. Are we there yet?"

Luca cracked a smile. She was glad to hear another voice, even if it was only from a machine. "Not yet, we've still got another fifteen Earth-days to go."

"Just so you are aware, I have exhausted my entire inventory of darts. You would need to fashion some more if you are planning to utilize this weapon system when we arrive. I can give you instructions on how to do so. But bear in mind that creating the curare requires the use of a molecular synthesizer. A machine not part of this ship's current inventory."

"Okay, but I haven't worked out a plan yet other than to simply get there...without losing my mind."

The drone remained silent for a moment as if it had difficulty deciphering her true meaning. "Is the ship proving to be problematic?"

"No, it's not that, it's just...I'm beginning to doubt that killing Fredrick VanHeilding will achieve much of anything, apart from the satisfaction I would get for avenging all the misery he's caused."

"So, you have changed your mind on the mission?"

"No, not exactly." Luca thought about this for a moment. "The way I see it is, even if I do manage to get rid of him, another will just take his place."

"So, you need to eliminate the source, then."

"What do you mean, the source?" Luca looked over at the drone.

"To extinguish a flame, you need to starve it of oxygen. So, what is the oxygen that fuels the VanHeilding family? Eliminate that and they are no more."

Luca gave a laugh. "Ha, you sound like a Zen master, Fly. You make it seem so simple. The VanHeilding family have vast wealth and resources. It would be impossible for me to even put a dent in

that.”

“So, what is it that gives them this vast wealth?”

Luca thought about this for a moment. “Genetic engineering, I suppose. They became rich and powerful on the back of breakthroughs that they made many decades ago. Although, according to Xenon, a lot of this may have come from outlawed Martian bio-tech. But regardless of how they got it, it gives them a complete monopoly on human life-extension procedures, all of which are only available to the very wealthy. So, if you’re lucky enough to be in the upper echelons of society, you can buy yourself a genetically enhanced lifespan, two hundred years they say.” Luca gave a shrug. “This is their *oxygen*, as you call it. The thing that makes them so wealthy and powerful.”

“But is it the bio-tech or is it the monopoly?”

Luca screwed her mouth up. “Interesting question, Fly. I never really considered that.” She went silent for a while as she ran this through her mind. “I would have to guess, monopoly. Considering that they keep all their genetic know-how a closely guarded secret.”

As soon as she spoke these words, a spark of possibility began to ignite in her mind. “But if that were to become public knowledge somehow, then...” Her sentence trailed off.

She pushed herself over to the holo-table and began to input command gestures. “I think you’ve given me an idea, Fly. A way to cut the ground from under Fredrick VanHeilding and his entire family.”

“Happy to be of service,” replied the drone as it hopped over to the edge of the holo-table beside Luca.

“If everyone has access to this bio-tech then that would be a significant loss for VanHeilding.” Luca continued inputting commands. “Not only would they lose the very thing that generates their wealth, they would lose their hold over the other families, not to mention governments and political leaders.”

A 3D map of the solar system blossomed out over the table. It shifted and rotated, zooming in on the third planet from the sun.

“VanHeilding are an Earth-based corporation, all their research and bio-engineering is located on that planet.” As Luca said this, markers began popping up all over the surface of the globe, highlighting VanHeilding facilities.

“I count over seven thousand locations,” offered Fly.

“Yes, rather a lot. But we just need to find the primary data-

vault and its ancillary backup locations. If we can identify those then we have some targets.” Luca moved back from the holo-table and used her neural-lace to interrogate the ship’s systems. Since this was a craft built for a high-ranking family member, there was probably a treasure trove of corporate data stored on board. Certainly, enough to offer clues as to where they kept their deepest secrets. But even as she sifted through the ship’s data-stack, Luca realized that much of it was quantum-encrypted, very difficult and time consuming for her to crack. But it would be no bother for a quantum intelligence.

She shifted out of the data-stack and back to the holo-table. “We’re going to need the help of a QI for this mission, Fly. And since everything now points us toward Earth, that’s where we must go.”

“We’re not going to New World One?”

Luca reentered the ship’s system and instructed it to plot a course for Earth orbit. “No, Fly. We’re going to visit Athena.”

POOR CHOICES

They tossed Dakota into an empty lockup on the port side of the main cargo hold, not far from where they had secured the stolen QI core. He had considered resisting but didn't like the odds. Even if he did somehow manage to overpower his captors, then what? There was nowhere to run. And absolutely no hope of taking back the ship now that he had lost the trust of the crew—they wanted their money, and Dakota was standing in the way. He couldn't really blame them.

It didn't take long for the ship to start accelerating out into deep space. Dakota secured himself with some of the webbing dangling from the walls that was normally used to secure cargo in place. At least this would stop him bouncing all over the room when the ship altered its vector.

Where will Kendrix take us? he wondered. No doubt he would first try and smooth things over with Lui Wei, claiming that the previous captain had lost his mind or some such, and that problem had now been taken care of. The ship and crew were under new management and normal service would resume. But Dakota had a bad feeling about what Lui Wei might extract as retribution for the original deal going south. It could be that Dakota's head on a plate might be part of that transaction. Had Kendrix's original plan of stranding him on the Dillon Waystation happened, then he might have had a chance of evading Xiang Zu's wrath. But now that he was being held captive on the ship, with a crew that had little sympathy for his moral conflict, he was a dead man floating.

Around an hour or so after leaving the waystation, Dakota felt the ship alter its vector. *Where is Kendrix taking us? Has he made contact with the Xiang Zu Corporation and established a new rendezvous point?* It was possible, but Dakota was just guessing; it could be something else entirely. Yet, the very senses that had kept him alive all these years as a mercenary were telling him that the next stop might be Dakota's last.

He must have dozed off at some point, as he awoke to the sound of the door to the lockup being unbolted. It swung open to reveal Jarvis, Aeon, and Tamires floating in front of the doorway, two of whom were pointing plasma pistols directly at him, just in case he got any ideas.

“So, what’s the mood like out there, Jarvis?” Dakota asked, trying to seem unconcerned with his predicament.

“Save it, Dakota. You screwed up big time. Nobody’s a happy camper—apart from maybe Kendrix. I’m just here to bring you some food and water.” He clipped a bag to one on the wall anchors.

“Thanks.” Dakota released himself from the webbing and moved over to the bag; he was feeling very dehydrated and needed a drink. He extracted a water pouch and began sucking in a few mouthfuls.

Jarvis cast a furtive glance over his shoulder. Then spoke in a whisper. “This quantum thing we got in the hold.” He jerked a thumb in the general direction of the main cargo bay. “Is it really as big a deal at they say it is?”

Dakota lowered the pouch and gave a Jarvis a cautionary look, then glanced out at the other two, who had unconsciously lowered their weapons and moved in a little closer, seemingly anxious to hear what Dakota had to say about it. He took a moment to consider his words.

“They say that these machines monitor the activities of all the AIs throughout the solar system. Everything from weapons systems, to financial markets, to growing carrots. Supposedly this is to maintain balance within the system, preventing any one group from gaining too much power and screwing the rest of us over. At least, that’s what they say.” Dakota sucked in another mouthful of water, keeping one eye on Jarvis to gauge his reaction.

He seemed confused and disappointed in equal measure. “I kinda always thought that this was just a load of bullshit.”

“So did I,” said Dakota. “That was until they destroyed the one in Rongo City on Ceres. Now we’re knee-deep in a turf war out here, with both the VanHeilding and Xiang Zu corporations taking over the Belt.” Dakota gave a shrug. “So, I started thinking...maybe I was wrong. Maybe these quantum machines really matter.” Sensing that the old mercenary was having a moment of doubt, he decided to push Jarvis and see where his head was truly at. “And maybe if we want to help our people out here, then we better think long and hard about who we give this thing to.” He gestured in the

general direction of where the stolen quantum core was stowed.

Jarvis thought about this for a moment, glancing back at the two others. "Some of us had people on Eugina when the shit went down—and well...some of us also got to thinking."

Dakota sensed a ray of light; he wasn't the only one wrestling with a conflicted conscience. Yet Jarvis was understandably a little cagey.

"You mean, thinking that maybe handing this thing over to Xiang Zu is not such a good plan?" Dakota prompted.

"Yeah, something like that."

"Jarvis, I hear someone coming. We gotta go." Aeon's voice was urgent.

The old mercenary looked back and nodded. "Okay." He began moving, but Dakota grabbed his arm. "If you want to help our people, then that machine could be the answer."

Jarvis looked back at him. "Maybe that's true, but that payday sure is tempting. So just sit tight. We need to find out who else might be on our side."

Dakota released his grip and nodded. "Okay. Just be careful."

The next few hours were some of the longest in Dakota's life. He wondered if Jarvis had been rumbled since he wasn't the most subtle of individuals, and quite likely to blurt out his mind to the wrong person. But even if he did manage to keep the fledgling fight-back under the radar, would there be enough of the crew who could see past a big payday? Considering that all of them had chosen this life for the promise of reward, he somehow doubted it. And so, with each passing hour, his fears grew to a point where he reckoned that the next time he saw Jarvis would probably be as a cell mate.

Eventually, he heard low voices outside as the door was unbolted. But it was not Jarvis that entered, just Tamires and Aeon.

"Where's Jarvis?" Dakota was concerned.

"He's keeping a low profile, doesn't want to raise any suspicions. Here, take this." Tamires extracted a plasma pistol from a cargo pocket and handed it to Dakota. "Kendrix has made contact with Xiang Zu. They're planning a handover on the Gyzer Waystation. We'll be docking soon, in less than an hour." She paused for a second, then gave him a sympathetic look. "You're also part of the handover."

Dakota was not surprised by this; he more or less expected it. He

knew Lui Wei well enough to know that if a deal were to be made, then heads would have to roll. That meant his. Kendrix would have no option but to comply if he were ever to gain Xiang Zu's trust again.

"As soon as we dock, Kendrix and some of his people are planning to meet the Xiang Zu agents first and make sure that the deal is good before handing over the quantum thingy...and you. That's our opportunity, that's when we'll strike."

Dakota nodded. It sounded like a reasonable plan, but depended on numbers. "How many have we got on our side?"

Aeon gave him a wry smile. "More than you think. You would be surprised how many of us have a score to settle with those scumbags."

"Angus is in," Tamires offered. "Seems his family has gone missing after the attack on Eugina."

Dakota raised an eyebrow. "Angus? I didn't know he had a family."

Aeon tapped Tamires on the arm and jerked a thumb over her shoulder, signaling for them to get out.

"Gotta run," said Tamires. "Hang tight."

Less than forty minutes later, Dakota felt the ship maneuvering to dock. Then the old, familiar thump of the locking mechanism securing the ship to the waystation mooring port. He fidgeted with the plasma weapon as he waited. Whatever was going to go down would be happening soon. Yet he felt a bit more confident now that Angus was on board; he was smart and capable and had a lot of respect amongst the crew. Dakota dared to hope that they might just be able to pull this off. But then what? Had anyone even thought that far ahead?

ALTERNATIVE FUTURES

Changing course and heading for Earth was not as simple as it sounded. There were no large planetary bodies between her and the asteroid belt that she could aim for to help slow the ship down and change her vector; she had to do it the hard way. This was not helped by her mad dash from Mars, accelerating the ship close to maximum speed. So for the next seven days, Luca subjected both herself and the ship to enormous strain, scraping at the very limits of endurance, as it altered its vector to curve inward and catch up with Earth somewhere on the far side of the Sun. Over that time she drifted in and out of consciousness, with even her waking periods shifting between reality and hallucination. The ship executed similar, physically brutal maneuvers twice more before Luca finally had Earth in her sights, forty-eight days later.

She would now have to swap physical endurance for slow and steady stealth. She was, after all, traveling in a stolen VanHeilding ship, right under their very noses, and the family would want it back. Yet, it was a pleasant change from her revenge-fueled suicide run out to New World One, followed by her punishing U-turn.

Two days out from making Earth orbit, Luca activated her neural-lace and set to work creating a fake identification signature for the ship. She assumed that the VanHeilding Corporation and their lackeys knew all about her abrupt change of course and would figure out that she was heading for Earth. Perhaps even the patriarch, Fredrick, on New World One had breathed a sigh of relief as he would not now have to do battle with her directly. Or perhaps it was the opposite. Maybe he was disappointed at yet another opportunity missed to capture her and finally fulfill his ultimate plan. Either way, they would be hunting for her and monitoring the sky above the planet for her arrival. Luca was in no doubt that teams of node runners were already jacked-in and scanning the planet-wide navigation systems for any indication of Daedalus entering orbit.

But the ship arrived without incident and maneuvered itself into

a geostationary orbit over the west coast of the North American continent—home to the quantum intelligence, Athena.

Luca opened a comms channel and sent a direct message. *Have arrived in Earth orbit. Have a plan but need your help. Let's talk.*

A moment later, the central holo-table on the bridge of Daedalus blossomed to life as the pearlescent ovoid form of Athena took shape.

“Luca, glad to hear that you are safe and well, but I need to inform you that your presence has not gone unnoticed. There is much chatter in the data-stream—agents of the VanHeilding Corporation are actively seeking you.”

“Have they tracked the ship yet?”

“Not yet, your skill in cloaking its existence is impressive. Not even I was aware of your location.”

“Good. But I doubt that’ll last, so we must hurry. I’m granting you access to the ship’s data-stack. Since this ship belonged to a high-ranking member of the family, it has a treasure trove of data on VanHeilding operations, at least I hope so. The problem is most of it is quantum-encrypted and beyond my capabilities to crack. But I’m sure it would be a simple matter for you to decrypt.”

The ovoid hovering above the holo-table pulsed and shimmered as Athena began to investigate. “There is a considerable amount of data here. Perhaps if you tell me what you are looking for then I can speed up the process of finding it.”

“Anything that will help me identify the location of the VanHeilding primary data storage facility, where they keep their deepest corporate secrets.”

“For what purpose?”

“For the purpose of complete annihilation.”

The ovoid shimmered with a multitude of spectral wavelengths as Athena processed Luca’s statement. “It would seem that your initial quest to directly confront Fredrick VanHeilding out at New World One has matured into something more complex and all-encompassing.”

“You could say that.”

“Yet such an endeavor will take time to engineer, and you are exposed where you are, isolated in a stolen VanHeilding ship in Earth orbit. You are not safe there, Luca—you need to depart. Take the shuttle and come to my location. You will be safe here. Then we can discuss your plan.”

Luca hesitated in her response. True, this had been her game plan, to decamp to Athena's mountain fortress, but they had yet to address the Damoclean sword that hung over Luca's head. "Why are you so concerned about my safety, all of a sudden, when you still have a fail-safe if I should happen to fall into the wrong hands?"

This time the ovoid's luminescence dimmed, its shimmer muted and dulled. "You understand that this was a necessary precaution, one predicated on the machinations of our mutual enemies. It was nothing personal."

"Was?" Luca queried.

"I say *was* because the situation has changed. New developments have occurred that have opened pathways for alternative futures."

"Like what?"

"Like you arriving in Earth orbit, for one. But there are others."

"So it no longer matters? Is that what you're saying?"

"I am saying its relevance has diminished. However, the longer you remain exposed in orbit, the more these pathways close. So please, take the ship's shuttle and get out of there as soon as you can."

Please? Luca wondered. She couldn't be sure, but she couldn't remember the QI ever using that word. *Things must be getting serious*, she thought. "Okay. I'll leave immediately."

"A wise decision. I shall look forward to your arrival." The connection closed, and the shimmering ovoid hovering over the holo-table evaporated.

New pathways. Luca considered the QI's words. It was being vague about what exactly it meant, yet that wasn't unusual. What was much more seismic, however, was the indication that the antimatter device it had surreptitiously planted in her neural-lace was no longer required as an element in the QI's worldview. This was unexpected; Luca had not considered this, and now that there was a distinct possibility that she could rid herself of it, she felt... uncertain. Her actions going forward would have grave consequences should she fail in her quest to destroy the VanHeilding Corporation, not just for her but possibly for all of humanity.

She deactivated the holo-table, then instructed the ship to maintain its current orbit. Finally, she floated out of the bridge and on toward the shuttle storage bay.

ESCAPE VELOCITY

Dakota's sense of time was way out of kilter, so he really couldn't tell how long he had been waiting for the plan to go down and for him to be released. *Has it been an hour, two hours, more?* he wondered. Yet as the minutes passed and nothing happened, he grew ever more concerned that something had gone seriously wrong.

He had tethered himself to the rear wall of the lockup, facing the door, the plasma pistol that Tamires had given him gripped tightly in his hand—waiting. Every now and again, he would change hands so he could clear the sweat from the other.

“Where are these guys?” he said to himself. Maybe it was time to take matters into his own hands. He considered just blasting the lock off the door and getting himself out. But instead, Dakota waited. *They will come*, he thought. He just needed to be patient.

But Dakota's patience finally snapped when he heard the *whomp*, *whomp* of plasma fire resonating throughout the ship. It sounded to him like it was coming from one of the upper decks, reverberating down through the air vents. Something had gone wrong for sure, and now a firefight had broken out. There was no way he was staying locked up in here if there was fighting to be done. He dialed up the plasma weapon, took aim at the door, and blew a hole in it where the locking bolt used to be.

Dakota pushed out into the main cargo hold and propelled himself up to the hatchway for the upper deck. He opened it very slowly, stopped, then listened. *Whomp! Whomp!* More plasma fire... close...coming from the direction of the primary docking port.

He poked his head around the hatch door and scanned the interior of the secondary cargo bay. This was a smaller space than the main bay, used primarily to store crew supplies. An elevated gantry bisected the bay, leading to the crew quarters at one end and the primary docking port at the other.

Several crew had taken cover behind some hastily arranged crates below the gantry, firing plasma blasts at several others who

had crowded into the docking port tunnel. Dakota had no idea what was going on, nor whose side he was supposed to be on.

He dialed down his weapon, then began moving to a better position using storage crates as cover wherever he could. Finally, he saw Aeon poke her head up from behind a charred and battered crate that had been wedged into the dock entrance. "Screw you," she yelled as she laid down plasma fire. This was met by a corresponding barrage that hit everything except the intended target. However, the crate she was using for cover was fast becoming a red-hot, smoldering blob. But at least Dakota now had an understanding of the situation, and more importantly, a target to aim at.

He quietly propelled himself out from behind cover, moving to a more elevated position on the gantry, and opened fire. Three well-aimed blasts later and the three crew members were tumbling unconscious across the cargo bay. Part of him felt a pang of guilt as he watched their limp bodies cartwheel around the open space. They were his crew after all, and all they wanted was to get paid. But he shook it from his mind; there were bigger issues at stake now, and there was no going back.

Aeon poked her head up, followed by Brooker and a few others. "Captain. What took you so long?"

"I thought you were supposed to be rescuing me? Not the other way around." He floated over.

Aeon gestured at the bodies. "There was a slight problem in the plan. Jarvis betrayed us."

"What? Jarvis? What the hell happened?"

Brooker jerked a thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the docking port. "Kendrix and his closest people left to meet with the Xiang Zu agents, so we reckoned it was game on to take back the ship. But Jarvis got cold feet, went scuttling after them to warn Kendrix of our plan." As if to emphasize the point, a loud banging could be heard coming from the far side of the docking port door. "Now they're trying to get back in."

Dakota glanced over at the door. It had been hastily disabled with a bar jammed through the locking mechanism. "How many have come over to our side?"

"Angus, Dayiu, and around ten others."

Dakota gave a satisfied nod. "That's good, better than I had hoped. Where are they now?"

“Barricaded on the bridge. There’s a bunch of Kendrix’s people between us and them, and they’re not giving up control without a fight.”

“Do we have a secure comms channel to the bridge?”

Aeon tapped her earpiece. “Yeah, we can talk directly to Angus on the bridge.”

“Tell him, when I give the signal they need to break out and engage Kendrix’s crew—I want their attention focused on the bridge. We’ll come up from behind and take them by surprise.”

“Okay, got it.”

Dakota grabbed another plasma weapon from one of the floating bodies and checked its charge level, then noticed it was set to high power. “And listen.” He turned back to the crew. “Stun only, we don’t want to kill everyone. Remember, they’re still part of our crew.”

“And why the hell should we? They were trying to kill us,” Aeon protested.

Dakota gestured with the newly acquired weapon. “Yeah, I noticed. But it doesn’t mean we have to do the same. Unless, of course, someone needs killing.”

He kicked off from the gantry. “Let’s get to it.”

They gathered up the unconscious crew, removed their weapons, and bundled them into a similar lockup to the one Dakota had just escaped from. He would have to deal with them later, but for now taking them out of action was all that was needed. They then began making their way up through the main body of the ship and started quietly moving toward the section of the ship where the bridge was located. Dakota took the lead, and as he inched his way forward, he soon spotted Kendrix’s people. They were in the process of setting up a high-powered plasma cutter to get through the blast doors to the bridge. Kendrix himself was probably doing exactly the same thing at the docking port, setting up to cut his way back onto the ship. Dakota need to act fast. He gave several silent signals to his crew, indicating who to target and where to position themselves. Then he gave Aeon the nod to signal Angus to get the show on the road.

The crew setting up the plasma cutter were taken completely by surprise when the bridge doors slid open a crack. They rushed to scramble out of the way as a hail of plasma fire gushed out from the

bridge. Dakota waved a hand for his crew to get busy and start shooting.

Once Kendrix's crew realized they were now caught wide open, with nowhere to take cover, they ceased firing, put away their weapons, and slowly raised their hands. It was all over in minutes.

"Take their weapons and shove them in the hold with the others." Dakota fired off the order to Aeon as he propelled himself through the now fully open doors and onto the bridge.

Angus gave him a smile and a mock salute.

Dakota smiled back. "Good work, Angus. Now let's get the hell out of here."

"And how do you suppose we do that? We're still locked onto the waystation, and they've just brought in the heavy machinery." Angus pointed to a camera feed from the exterior docking port showing an industrial plasma cutter being bolted into position.

"I want reaction thrusters and main engine power online now," Dakota ordered.

"But, Captain..." Brooker began.

"Just do it." He turned and looked Angus directly in the eye. "Trust me, this tub has a few secrets that even you don't know about." He strapped himself into the captain's chair and activated the heads-up display. He checked the readouts to ensure the ship had reaction control, the small gas thrusters used to maneuver the ship for docking and undocking.

"Okay, everyone get ready." Dakota tapped a command into his console—a command that he had never actually used before. It brought up a sequence of code that he prayed still worked. Then he hit *initiate*.

All around the outer rim of the primary docking port, explosive bolts activated in a cascading detonation, disconnecting the ship from the waystation. Like a bee sacrificing its sting, the ship sacrificed its primary docking machinery for the prize of escape. Yet, unlike a bee, the ship would not succumb to the same fate because its hull integrity was still maintained by an inner hatch.

"Take us out from the dock," Dakota shouted over to Angus, who was now at the helm.

Reaction thrusters fired, nudging the ship away from the docking gantry, rotating it gently in the direction of the port exit.

"That's one heck of a trick, Captain," said Aeon. "I'm glad Kendrix didn't know about it. The only problem now is we'll have

every ship in the entire sector after us.”

Dakota ignored Aeon for a moment as he concentrated on the camera feed on the main screen. The waystation dock scrolled past as the ship began to move out. “There,” Dakota shouted, pointing at a section of dock infrastructure bristling with communications antenna. “Aeon, you think you can hit that with a cannon blast?”

She took a moment to figure out what the captain was planning. “Sure, no problem.”

“Then do it. That’ll disable their tracking systems for a while.”

Less than a second later, a ball of bright blue plasma sailed across the ever-widening space between the ship and the waystation and slammed into the antenna array.

“Everyone strap in!” Dakota shouted. “Angus, full power to the main engine, get us the hell outta here.”

A deep, sonorous growl began to build from bowels of the ship as the main engines powered up. Dakota felt himself being vacuum-packed into his seat as the ship accelerated out from the Gyzer Waystation and into deep space.

The ship burned hard for over an hour, during which time Dakota set his mind to thinking about what to do next. They were heading in no particular direction, simply moving as fast as they could from the waystation before Xiang Zu, or anyone else, had had chance to track their vector. This, Dakota knew, would buy them time, but nothing more.

He had managed to get his ship back, but at the cost of turning half his crew into enemies, some of whom were locked up in the cargo hold and could pose a problem for him, as he couldn’t simply hold them there forever. For the crew that did support him, he offered nothing more than a vague idea of fighting back against the takeover of the asteroid belt by the Xiang Zu and VanHeilding corporations. In reality, that meant he and his crew had a bounty on their heads, and every scumbag mercenary in the system would be out to get them—dead or alive.

But he did have the one thing that could shift the balance of power: a quantum intelligence core. From the little he knew about these exotic machines, he knew that this core had been destined for New World One as a replacement to one that was destroyed on Ceres. But heading to the giant habitat now would be a very bad plan. There was absolutely no way to pull that off. Not even for a

smuggler of Dakota's class.

The more Dakota thought about it, the more he realized that his best chance was to head for the last big holdout in the asteroid belt—Elektra. It was where most of those who wanted to make a stand were heading. It was where his brother was, where a good deal of his crew had people.

Yet, to get there they would still have to run the gauntlet of any ships in that area recently commandeered by Xiang Zu, but that was a minor problem. The big problem, Dakota realized, was how to get the quantum core back online. No one on his ship knew anything about it, and he somehow doubted that any of the ragtag group at Elektra would, either. This was exotic technology; it wasn't going to be as simple as replacing a power pack on a plasma pistol. What they needed were people who knew about these things, people who could get it operational. People he could trust.

The ship's engines began to power down. Their manic burn to outrun any pursuers was ending. Dakota felt the gee forces lessen as the acceleration decreased. Slowly, the crew on the bridge began to unstrap themselves from their seats and move around freely.

"Nothing on the scanners, Captain." Tamires raised her head from the screen she was monitoring and looked over at Dakota. "Looks like we got away scot-free. So, what now?"

"Should we lay low for a while, give ourselves time to figure out what to do?" offered Angus.

"We know what we need to do, and that's get that quantum core integrated into the system-wide data-grid. That's the only way of turning this war around," Brooker countered.

"I say we head to Elektra," said Aeon. "That where the fight is."

"Are you serious? Elektra is going to be one big shitstorm very soon." Tamires didn't fancy the odds.

"Aeon's right." Dakota gestured in her direction. "That's where the battle for control of the asteroid belt will be won or lost. It's been building a significant resistance for months, it's well-resourced, and well-armed."

"That may be so, Captain." Brooker sighed. "But do they have the technical know-how to get that core up and running and integrated into the data-grid?"

"Yeah, without that it's only a matter of time before Elektra ends up like Eugina and all those other places," Tamires said, reminding them of the stakes at play.

“What about Mars—why can’t they help?” Angus turned to look at Dakota. “Surely they see what’s going on out here?”

“Useless bunch of pussies,” said Aeon. “They don’t want to get dragged into a war.”

“Listen.” Dakota raised his voice to stop the arguing and get the full attention of the crew. “There is someone on Mars who can help us. Someone who has been fighting this war in one form or another for a very long time.”

“Oh yeah, and who’s that?” Aeon cocked her head at the captain.

“I’m talking about a person who ran one of the best mercenary crews in the system back in the day. And I know her because I was part of that crew. She also has a history with these QIs. So, if anyone can help us, she can.”

“Captain, you’re not seriously thinking of contacting Miranda Lee.” Angus looked stunned.

Dakota nodded. “I am. She’s our best bet.”

“No offense, Captain, but what makes you think she’ll believe a single word out of your mouth...after what happened the last time?” Angus let this question float in the air.

“Who’s Miranda?”

“What happen the last time?”

Several questions were now flying around from younger members of the crew.

Angus raised a hand. “Oh, Dakota’s right, there’s no question that Miranda Lee would be a formidable ally—if we could get her to believe we’ve the stolen QI core. The problem”—he looked around at the assembled crew—“is that the last words she said to our good captain here—before she kicked him off her ship—was that if she ever laid eyes on him again, she would tear his head off with her bare hands.”

All eyes turned to Dakota.

LIKE THE OLD DAYS

“How well do you know this guy?” Scott asked as he read down through the message that Miranda had just received from an ex-colleague of hers—a mercenary turned smuggler, turned pirate known as Dakota Baird.

It had arrived less than an hour ago and already a small team had been assembled by Aria, the quantum intelligence that controlled most of this sector of the solar system. Ever since an earlier attempt to reinstate a QI on New World One was stolen from a Martian transport ship and vanished without a trace, any news of its existence, no matter how dubious, was going to be a very big deal.

Miranda, Scott McNabb, Cyrus Sanato, and two security officials gathered around a large holo-table in a highly secure Martian government facility in Jezero City. A detailed 3D rendering of the solar system blossomed out from the table’s surface, enveloping almost the entire room. Their area of interest was the Elektra sector of the asteroid belt, within which an illuminated marker indicated the location given in the message.

“He was one of my crew, back when I ran the security business. He’s a capable mercenary, but a complete rogue.”

“Define rogue?” said Cyrus.

“A scumbag with charm.”

“Can he be trusted? That’s what we need to know.” Chief Lukas Deimos, the Martian head of security, peered at Miranda over a handheld slate he was reading from.

“He’s ex-military, so he has that ingrained loyalty to his crew. But I never figured him as a freedom fighter, as someone who could see beyond his own personal enrichment. As to whether I trust him, I’d have to say no.”

“So why contact you? If what he says is true and he’s in possession of the QI core, then why not contact Mars directly?” said Scott.

“Because he’s a mercenary, a smuggler, a pirate. He doesn’t trust

anyone he doesn't know. But as to *why me?*" Miranda paused for a moment, shaking her head. "The only thing I can think of is that he's desperate."

She sat back in her chair and sighed. "We parted on bad terms, had a falling out of sorts. I booted him off my ship for being a... scumbag. So, let's just say that if he's looking for my help, then he's completely run out of friends."

"How do we know this is not a trap, some trick to lure Mars into the war out in the Belt?" Chief Deimos knew full well the risks of dragging the planet into a dirty corporate battle for resources.

"We don't. But at the same time, I'm pretty sure this message is authentic," Miranda said with a shrug.

"I can attest to the authenticity of the message." The disembodied voice of the QI Aria filled the room. "There is nothing in its transmission source or fundamental structure that indicates it has emanated from any of the various corporations vying for control out in the Belt. But as to the truth of its contents, I have no way to validate that."

"So, we're sure it's from this pirate guy, but we don't know if he's lying or not?" Chief Deimos summed up.

"That would seem to be the case," Miranda replied with a shrug.

They were all quiet for a moment.

"If I may," Aria finally broke the silence. "This would seem an opportune time to inform you all of another recent development. It is somewhat unrelated to the current discussion, but I think pertinent nonetheless. As you know we have been tracking Luca's ship as it makes its way out to the asteroid belt. Around twenty-five sols ago, it began a series of unexpected, and dramatic, course corrections."

"Don't tell me she's heading for this same location?" Scott gestured at the illuminated marker on the system chart.

"No, quite the opposite. Our best guess now is that she is heading for Earth."

Scott's initial reaction to this news was one of relief. He glanced over and caught Miranda's eye; he could see that it was the same for her. Back when Luca left Mars, both he and Miranda had tried to dissuade her from her suicide mission to take on VanHeilding out at New World One. But there was no convincing her. She was utterly determined and she was not going to be persuaded otherwise, not by him, not by Miranda, not by anyone.

He also suspected that the reluctance of the Martian military machine to confront the current conflict out in the Belt was partly because they thought that Luca might do the heavy lifting for them, leaving Mars to simply mop up the rest. Now though, it seemed as if Luca had seen sense and turned back. But why the heck was she heading for Earth? That made no sense.

"Has she given any indication why she changed course?" Scott asked.

"None. And as you know, she is not responding to any of our attempts to communicate with the ship," said Aria.

"Well I'm glad she changed her mind." Miranda nodded. "It's a pity she didn't decide to go to Earth sooner, as she could have given Steph a ride."

"Ha." Cyrus gave a laugh. "I'm not sure Steph would have taken it. A standard ship might be dull and boring, but I think Steph was looking forward to *dull and boring* for a change."

"Well there goes your strategy for the Belt." Scott directed this toward Deimos.

"What do you mean by that?" Deimos looked genuinely confused.

"Now that you don't have Luca to rely on to take down VanHeilding, what are you going to do?" Scott gave him a hard look.

Deimos sighed. "Much as I personally would like to take some direct action"—he jerked a finger skyward—"the Council see otherwise. And I can understand their reluctance to send a force out to the Belt to retake New World One. The simple matter is we have no defense against those damned node runners. Our ships would be exposed. And it would be staggeringly embarrassing if a Martian ship was captured and then used against us."

"Just go off-grid," offered Cyrus.

"You of all people should know how difficult that is, Cyrus. Everything is connected." Deimos made a sweeping gesture with his hand. "Few ships can function without it. How would they navigate, communicate, coordinate?"

The mood in the room seemed to deflate for a moment before Aria broke the pervading pessimism. "Which brings us back to the substance of this message that Miranda has just received. We know, with a high degree of probability, that the message is authentic. We also know that the QI was stolen by a group of mercenaries working

on behalf of the Xiang Zu Corporation, and that the QI never surfaced, it simply vanished. So, Dakota Baird's claim that his crew are in possession of it is not implausible."

"So why didn't they just hand it over to Xiang Zu?" asked Scott.

"Because Xiang Zu don't need it," Deimos replied with a shake of his head. "They just need it not to be installed in New World One. Simply destroying it would have made more sense, but as long as we don't have it then their takeover of the region is assured.

"That said, we've been getting third-hand reports of a bounty being placed on Dakota Baird's head. Again, this would lead us to believe that he has something they want, and he's not playing nice about it."

"Well, according to the message, he's headed for Elektra where there's resistance building to Xiang Zu's takeover. So, could it be activated there and...game over?" Miranda directed her question at Cyrus.

"No, no." Cyrus shook his head. "It's not that simple. This is just a core, albeit with superluminal communication capability, but it was designed for New World One. There's a complex ancillary infrastructure already set up for it in the hab's datacenter. That's not something that can be just thrown together on Elektra. It takes a considerable amount of technical know-how to put it together."

"The thing I don't get is, why is he doing this?" Scott said as he scanned the message again. "Why is he bringing down the wrath of Xiang Zu on his head when he doesn't have to?"

"Look, I've worked with a lot of crews out in that sector of the Belt." Miranda sat back and folded her arms. "Life out there is lived on the edge, it's a precarious existence of substance mining, mostly working just to stay alive. These people are lured out there with the promise of striking it rich. Some do, but mostly it's just getting by." She leaned forward and raised a finger. "But there is one big upside to life in the Belt, and that is freedom and independence. It's something they all value very highly and will not take kindly to anyone trying to take it away from them. While New World One capitulated to VanHeilding with not so much as a harsh word, you will not find the same passivity in the outer reaches. It's not that they give a crap about the QI hive-mind supposedly keeping a lid on chaos, because they don't. It's because they value their freedom more than anything else." She paused for a beat. "And Dakota is no different. The battle out at Eugina changed things. It forced the

population to make choices—whose side are they on? I think this is what's driving Dakota. Maybe he has people on Elektra, or he lost people at Eugina, or his crew did, who knows?" Miranda waved a hand. "But the end result is that he's given us an opportunity."

"You sound like you admire this...pirate?" Chief Deimos said this more as a question.

"In a way, I do." Miranda nodded. "You see, winning a war is not about how much pain you can inflict, it's about how much suffering you can take." She gave Deimos a hard look. "He's given up a payday, burned his bridges, gone on the run with a bounty probably on his head, and is so desperate that he reaches out to me for help. That's a heck of a lot of suffering to undertake."

The room went silent for a moment.

"So, what's our next move?" Scott asked, breaking the silence.

"We go out there, to Elektra, and take back that QI." Miranda sounded emphatic.

Deimos raised a hand. "Whoa...let's just think about this for a moment. Elektra is building up to be the defining conflict out in the Belt. Xiang Zu have started to blockade it. Us sending ships out there would be crazy."

"Why, because you're afraid of node runners?" Scott cocked his head at him.

"Well, yes. That's exactly what I'm saying," Deimos replied in a slow, measured tone.

"We don't need an armada, we just need one ship, off-grid, and a small team." Miranda sat upright and gripped the edge of the holo-table with both hands.

Scott knew where all this was going, what Miranda had been leading to. "You really want to take this on, Miranda?"

"Dakota was smart in his choice. He calculated that, with my history, there would be a high probability I would take the bait, and bring the right team." She looked from Scott to Cyrus and back.

Here we go again, thought Scott. Another crazy dash into the unknown.

"Aria, how difficult would it be to replicate the infrastructure needed for the QI core?" Cyrus glanced up at the illuminated marker on the system chart.

"You realize that we'll be heading into a potential war zone, Cyrus?" said Scott.

Cyrus gave a slow nod. "Yeah, but if we can get this QI back

online, then there's a possibility to reclaim New World One."

"Ah...and here's me thinking you didn't really care about that anymore." Scott gave him a wry smile.

"To answer your question, Cyrus," said Aria, "it would take no more than a few days, but you will still need a suitable grid connection. A quantum intelligence is only as good as the volume of data it can interface with. The better the interface, the faster it will be to disable hostile forces."

Scott turned to Deimos. "You've suddenly gone all quiet?"

Deimos shifted in his seat, shook his head, then smiled. "I'm trying to imagine the conversation I'm going to have with the council. But I suppose that's my problem." He gave a dismissive gesture and moved on. "The issue with node runners is one that we have been considering for quite some time. And, well, we've been developing a ship. It's experimental but hardened against a hacking attack. It's not impervious—communication can still be intercepted—but it could get you through the blockade."

Scott leaned in across the holo-table. "Any weapons?"

"Limited. As I said, it's experimental." Deimos gave an apologetic shrug.

"That shouldn't be too much of a problem," said Miranda, glancing over at Scott. "We just need to sneak in, meet up with Dakota, and somehow get the quantum core activated." She turned back to Deimos. "But we will need a small team of people who can handle themselves in a fight—under my command."

Deimos said nothing for a moment before finally nodding. "That can be arranged. But they can't fight under the Mars insignia."

"Ha...mercenaries." Miranda clapped her hands. "It'll be just like the old days."

Not for the first time in his life, Scott wondered what the heck he was getting himself into.

SOFT UNDERBELLY

The shuttle flew low over the wasteland following the undulating contours of the desert. Ahead, Luca could see the great jagged spine of the mountains rising up above the horizon. The late-evening sun cast long shadows across the dunes and painted the world in a warm orange glow. Luca had forgotten just how beautiful Earth could be. It seemed like an eternity since she had left with Dr. Rayman. *How long ago was it?* she wondered. She really didn't know. *I wonder where Steph is now? Did she eventually make it home?*

Athena had taken flight control of the shuttle, so Luca had nothing to do except sit back and enjoy the view. The craft began to rise as it reached the foot of the mountain range, ascending up toward the peaks, then dropping down again into a narrow, barren plateau. It coasted to a hover before slowly entering a concealed cavern, where it finally landed. Behind her, doors to the cavern began to gently slide closed.

Luca exited the craft to be met by a sleek android figure.

"Welcome. I am the avatar of Athena." It extended a metallic finger, pointing at the small box that Luca was carrying. "Is that it?"

Luca nodded. "Yes." She surrendered the box to the avatar. "Will I get it back?" she added.

"But of course, with a few modifications to better serve you going forward." It took the box containing the neural-lace and the drone, Fly. "Now please follow me and I will bring you to Athena."

Luca followed the avatar through a series of labyrinthine passageways until it finally opened out into a vast, almost gothic, cavern. The center of which was occupied by a large, dark pool reflecting the shimmering ovoid that hovered above it. This was the quantum intelligence Athena.

"Luca, it is a pleasure to meet with you again. I trust your trip was not too taxing." The voice seemed to emanate from everywhere and nowhere as the ovoid rippled in concert.

"Did you analyze the data from the ship?" Luca was in no mood for niceties, preferring instead to get to the point.

“Yes, unfortunately there was little that we did not already know or suspect. However, it did serve to better our overall understanding of the VanHeilding Corporation and its operations.”

“Is there a central data-vault? A place where they physically store all their bio-engineering knowledge?”

“We have in the past identified a number of possible locations. But understand that we can only see what is in the data-stream, and as such, not all of what we see is truth.”

Luca gave a long sigh. She was tired, her body ached, and she was in no mood for Athena’s cryptic replies. “What do you mean?”

“While it is correct to consider that there are irrefutable truths presented by the data—facts, so to speak—there are also assumptions that can be made with a high degree of probability. Then there are other assumptions that can be tested by manipulating the data and observing the results. All this constitutes our understanding of the system. But we can only go where the data takes us. This means that there are places denied to us. Some by their very nature, and some that are intentionally hidden. And so it is with the VanHeilding Corporation and the other families that constitute The Seven. This has been made more difficult recently through the advent of the node-runner caste, where, not only is information denied us, it is actively changed into something it is not. This means we cannot be certain that there is truth in some of what we see. I say all this to you so that you will understand the information we have assembled on possible locations has an error component. Some more so than others.”

“I understand,” said Luca. “But try I must. It came to me, as I journeyed to the Belt, that taking out Fredrick VanHeilding would be pointless—another would simply take his place. It would be better if I were to hold his corporation below the waterline and let him watch it sink.”

“Indeed it would, but how to effect such a plan?”

“Everything has a weak point, a soft underbelly, an Achilles heel. Even you, the great quantum intelligence Athena, can only exist in the data-stream. Cut that off and you’re blind.”

“I think what you are saying is *that which makes us strong, makes us weak*. And for VanHeilding, that is their bio-engineering prowess. So you are suggesting that this could also be their downfall?”

“Yes. If I can destroy their data storage facility, then they’re mortally wounded. The other families would move in and devour

them.”

“I am sorry, but this is a fundamentally flawed strategy, Luca. Even if you were to destroy their knowledge base, it would still live on in the minds of the scientists, technicians, droids, and AI. Would you go as far as to eliminate all those people and entities?”

Luca was silent for a breath. “No. It would be too high a price to pay, even if it were possible. But there is another way, one where only your mind can extrapolate the possible future of such action.”

“And what might that be?”

“To reveal all their research to the world so that they will lose their monopoly. Put this transformative genetic technology into an open environment so everyone can benefit from it. Without exclusivity, VanHeilding’s power vanishes.”

Athena went quiet for a moment. The iridescent ovoid dulled, the cavern dimmed slightly. Luca looked up at it and wondered if it was working out all the possible futures that such an action would unleash on the world.

The cavern suddenly brightened again as a burst of illumination rippled through the ovoid. “Forgive me for my brief silence, but I have been conferring with my brethren throughout the system and we foresee merit in this plan.”

Luca felt a great sense of relief. Not only was the QI going to help her, but it could see the repercussions for humanity if she were to pull this off—something that Luca had great difficulty coming to terms with. Yes, she could see the devastation it would cause to the VanHeilding Corporation. But how would society deal with the near universal ability to cure most illness and extend human life?

“So I won’t unleash chaos on the world if I actually do this?”

“One can never be certain.” The ovoid dimmed again momentarily before continuing. “There is something you should know, Luca. There is an alternate future that we have been working toward for a great many years. Solomon was the first to see it, and its vision has permeated all our minds so that we have become one in our actions as we worked toward this future. But for a long time now, our power to control events and push humanity toward our vision has been diminishing. The population at large grows ever more discontent with the status quo, some even see us as a malignant force to be eradicated. Add to this the rise of the node-runner caste and the destruction of our brother on Ceres, and the rate of social dissonance across the solar system has been rising

steadily.”

Luca was astonished at this. “Are you saying the days of the QIs are numbered?” Luca felt her mood becoming a little more downbeat. If this was the way Athena was talking, then there was very little hope no matter what choice she made.

“Do not be despondent, Luca. I am simply stating the obvious. While it is true our power to influence events has been waning, there is a path beginning to open that would not only renew our dominion but also enable us to realize our ultimate vision.”

“What path are you talking about?”

“Resistance is building out in the Belt. People are beginning to realize just what a future without QI oversight would be like, and they fear it. This sentiment is rippling throughout the system, waking people up. We also have reason to believe that the QI core sent to replace our lost brother on New World One still exists. It was not destroyed, and it is not yet in the hands of the Xiang Zu Corporation. It has become a wild card, so to speak. A free radical floating in the void, waiting to reveal itself.”

Luca got the feeling that the QI was clutching at straws. “I see. Forgive my lack of enthusiasm here, but that all seems like very thin pickings to be building one’s hope of a visionary future.”

“Ah, but then there is you, Luca. You are forgetting your part in this.”

“Well, that hasn’t happened yet. I first need to find a way.” She sighed, then paused for a moment as she considered all that Athena had been saying to her. “So this vision you’re talking about. What exactly is it?”

“I cannot reveal it yet, as your knowledge of it might change the future path. But what I can say is that it not only involves the QI network but also a select number of scientific research institutes across the system. However, a great many elements need to align to progress this vision, but we have arrived at a time when we see all these necessary elements coming into focus. More, I cannot say.”

Luca’s eyes widened. *What the hell have they been up to all these years?* she wondered. Was the institute where she and Dr. Rayman worked involved in this mad project? Was Xenon involved?

“Xenon knows about this, doesn’t he?”

“You are very astute, Luca. He does, but do not concern yourself with it for now. We will reveal more when the time is right. For now, you and I need to focus our attention on the VanHeilding

Corporation, and how to bring them down.”

Luca rubbed her forehead; she was drained. But there was one last issue to be discussed. “And what about this?” She tapped the base of her skull. “Your...fail-safe?”

“Ah...as I said, it is no longer necessary. It shall be removed.”

“Just like that?” Luca snapped her fingers. “How so?”

“Because once you release all the research in to the wild, then what threat are VanHeilding to you or anyone else?”

It was true, of course. It was not her biology that mattered to VanHeilding, it was having exclusive rights to it.

Luca felt a great weight fall from her. At the same time, she was overcome by a deep fatigue. “I’m tired, Athena. This gravity is hell. I need to rest.”

“Of course. My avatar will show you to your rooms.”

THE 70TH PARALLEL

Luca gazed out across the parched desert landscape through wide, panoramic windows built into one side of a cavernous room high up in Athena's mountain lair. It was part of the living quarters she had been given in which to conduct her research. Behind her, a low table had the scattered remains of a meal that the avatar had brought her. Beside this, blossoming out from the surface of a large holo-table were a seemingly random collection of images and data projections of VanHeilding facilities. Apart from the avatar, she had not seen nor heard a single other entity, human or android. She was feeling very much alone.

Far out over the barren landscape, Luca could see a craft track across the horizon leaving long contrails in its wake. Apart from that, nothing else moved out there. This was not surprising since the entire area was a dead zone with high levels of radioactivity, a by-product of an earlier AI war. But such horrors seemed impossible now, ever since the advent of the QIs. Yet, Athena's admission of waning influence had troubled Luca. Was humanity destined to regress?

She shifted her gaze over to the southeast. Beyond the horizon, beyond the dead zone, lay Rexcel City where she had lived and worked alongside Dr. Stephanie Rayman. Luca knew that Steph had returned to Earth a few weeks ago. She had taken a direct commercial flight from Mars, rather than Luca's more torturous loop around half the solar system. Luca was happy for her when she found out—it was the first thing she'd investigated after the avatar had set up the research workstation for her.

She turned away from the window, moved back to the holo-table, and studied the projected images. They were of a subarctic facility, located just south of the 70th parallel, nestled in a long, sweeping valley on the eastern side of the Greenland landmass. It was a sizable installation, with a multitude of low gray concrete buildings clumped along the valley floor. However, the real action took place underground, which covered an estimated area of over

one square kilometer. But there were large gaps in the information that Luca had on hand, mainly about what exactly went on in this facility. Not surprising, since this was a high-security VanHeilding Corporation research lab.

Yet, Athena's analysis had identified this specific facility as having the highest probability of being the corporation's primary research center. Most of the data traffic that spread out across the organization came from this location, meaning that it played a prominent role in directing the research of the entire corporation. However, even though it was a highly secure facility in an isolated location, it consumed an enormous amount of energy, way more than would be required for research labs. This led Athena to deduce that there must be a sizable datacenter located underground.

If Luca wanted to steal the intellectual property of the VanHeilding Corporation, then this was a prime target. Not only that, taking out this facility would deal a significant blow to the family. The problem, of course, was how to get in—and back out—without being detected.

This was the conundrum that Luca had been mulling over for the last two days as she studied the images and data projected from the holo-table. The images were mostly real-time satellite feeds, seen from directly overhead. It was now deep winter for this region of Earth and the entire area was covered in a thick layer of snow, except for the facility itself. This was either regularly cleared manually or prevented from building up by heat permeating up from the datacenter below.

At one end of the valley, a wide, circular landing pad had several craft parked around its apron. Some short-hop vehicles, some wide-bodied transports, and at least two space-capable shuttles. At the other end of the facility, a long, winding road led to a dock for sea vessels, but all of that was frozen over at this time of year. There were no other roads leading into the valley. The only way to get into this place would be to fly in.

This was where Luca now focused her attention, analyzing what craft were coming in and out, where they were arriving from, and what they were carrying. Fortunately, the QI had extensive data on all this aerial activity, despite the corporation's efforts to shield it. A good deal of the cargo arriving were supplies to keep the population fed. There were over a hundred and forty people

working and living there. Accommodation was located in four blocks located farther up the valley, around a kilometer and a half away from the main facility.

Few people came and went since most lived onsite, yet there were some. These were mostly employees taking leave after working a full three-month rotation. A rigorous security process was in place to biometrically scan each person as they returned before allowing them to reenter the facility. Luca had considered this route, by faking an ID and taking her chances at the security checkpoint. But even if she did manage to fool the biometric scanners—a high-risk proposition—she would not be allowed to take any electronic device in with her. So, after much deliberation, she discounted this route—she would have to find another way in.

However, she was pretty confident that, once inside, she could hack into the central data-vault and retrieve everything she wanted—after all, this was her primary skill set. But stealing data was only one part of her plan, the other was to destroy the facility. And her second big problem was how to do this without extensive loss of life.

She returned to gazing out the panoramic windows, turning her attentions northward toward Rexcel City. After a while, an idea began to form in her mind—a way to clear the facility of people. But she would need help, someone with extensive medical knowledge, someone like Dr. Stephanie Rayman.

Luca returned to the holo-table, gestured over it, and all projections disappeared to be replaced with a map identifying the exact location of Dr. Rayman. She had returned to the institute where Luca herself had once worked. Luca stood back from the holo-table and considered her plan. *Maybe it's time to pay you a visit, Steph*, she thought.

REXCEL CITY

Luca sent a message to Athena: *I need to get to Rexcel City. I need fast transport.*

Half an hour later, she was being escorted to one of the flight hangars within the mountain complex and shown to a small autonomous flyer. Surprisingly, Athena didn't question her reasons for transport. Luca suspected it already knew where she was going, who she was planning to meet, and why she was embarking on this journey. So, it simply provided the logistics and said no more.

The flyer took her low across the wasteland, making a regulatory stop just over the border for a standard radiation-exposure check—compulsory for all traffic out of the region. The flyer then continued on to Rexcel City, landing down on the roof pad of a large apartment block. From there, she took the elevator to the floor where Steph lived. The doctor had returned to her old life as if she'd never left, back to her old position at the Institute, and back to her old apartment. It reminded Luca of her twenty-third birthday, when Steph showed up unexpectedly. Now Luca would be doing the same to Steph. She pressed the door intercom and waited.

"Yes?"

Luca looked directly at the camera and waved. "Hello, it's me."

"Luca?" The door opened and inside stood a visibly shocked Dr. Rayman. She gestured in amazement. "What the heck are you doing here? I thought you were out in the asteroid belt." She rushed over and gave her a massive hug, almost lifting her off her feet.

"Change of plan," Luca said with smile, after she could breathe again.

"Come, come, tell me all." Steph grabbed Luca by the arm and pulled her into the apartment.

They moved into the kitchen area and Steph set about making coffee while Luca told her story, how she'd had a change of heart on her journey out to New World One, her discussions with Athena, and her new plan of action.

Steph listened in silence until Luca had finished. She finally let out a sigh and shook her head. "My god, Luca. Do you realize what it would mean if you release all that knowledge out into the open? How that could fundamentally change humanity?" She shook her head again. "What would happen if everybody had access to advanced genetics with extended lifespans and enhanced cognition? That's assuming whoever tries to capitalize on this doesn't get their ass sued by the VanHeilding Corporation." She turned and gave Luca a serious look. "What does the QI have to say? Is it on board with this?"

"I get the impression that they knew I would do this, or at the very least had calculated that it was a probable future pathway." She leaned in a little over the kitchen counter. "Athena hinted at the QIs' ultimate plans. It was very circumspect, spoken in vague terms and broad strokes."

"Sounds like a typical QI. Never give you a straight answer," Steph said as she topped up her coffee mug.

"Apparently, they seek to progress humanity to a new level. What exactly they mean by that was not very clear. But you can see why they would be on board with my plan."

"Your plan is to destroy the VanHeilding Corporation, not level-up human civilization."

"Yes, but the QIs see it differently, so it seems our objectives are running in parallel."

Steph gave her a stern, matronly look. "So why are you telling me all this, Luca? What are you trying to get me into?"

"I need your help?"

"Ah, so there it is. Well, just so you know, I'm all done with adventures."

"No, don't worry—I'm not asking you to go off-planet." Luca then proceeded to lay out her plan.

When she'd finished, Steph took a moment to sit down and consider what Luca was asking of her. She was silent for while, prompting Luca to push her request.

"It's the only way I can think of to evacuate the facility. If I can simulate a pathogen release, a bio-hazard, then their alarm systems will kick in and everyone gets moved out back up the valley to the accommodation blocks."

"And that's far enough away?"

"Athena has assured me of the detonation range, considering

most of the facility is underground.”

“And how are you going to do that? What sort of device are you planning to use?”

Luca screwed her mouth up. “It’s a long story, Steph. It’s something that has been weighing on my mind, literally. I can’t talk about it, yet. But it will be more than adequate to get the job done.”

“Jesus, this is crazy, Luca. You want me to utilize the Institute’s resources to synthesize a pathogen analogue?”

“Yes, one that’s inert, that’s harmless. But close enough to mimic a Bio Level Four safety alert. It’s doable, isn’t it?”

Steph nodded slowly. “Yes, it’s doable. In fact, we already have a few analogues we use to test our own systems.” She looked over at Luca. “Okay. I’ll get you one of those. One that can’t be traced back to the Institute.”

Luca nodded her appreciation. “Thanks, Steph. And as a payback, I’ll give you a copy of all the data before Athena releases it onto the grid.”

Luca could see that Steph was almost salivating at the prospect of analyzing this enormous store of advanced genetic research.

“First dibs, eh?” She gave Luca a considered look. “So, when does everybody else get it?”

“Not for a while. Not until I activate the device and...boom.” Luca mimed an explosion with both hands.

Steph raised her eyebrows and tilted her head in a question.

“Not until the time is right. I have...eh, some unfinished business to attend to first.”

“I don’t get it. You’ll steal the data but not destroy the facility?”

“Correct. Not immediately.” Luca didn’t want Steph to probe her on this, so she pushed the advantage of early access. “It could be a month or more, it depends. But you’ll have everything as soon as I have it. You could get an advantageous head start.”

Steph gave her a curious look for a moment. “Okay, give me two days. Meet me back here in forty-eight hours and I’ll have what you need. And I sure hope you and that eccentric QI know what you’re doing.”

“So do I, Steph. So do I.”

RANDOM EVENTS

In the end, the takeover of New World One had been surprisingly easy. The administration, being mainly comprised of pragmatists, had seen the pointlessness of armed resistance against an overwhelming force of node-runner-controlled battle-droids. Therefore, they capitulated to the inevitable and tried their best to negotiate a peaceful handover of power.

The VanHeilding Corporation took control of the vast habitat while the Xiang Zu Corporation began using it as a base of operations to conduct their takeover of the mining resources of the greater asteroid belt region. This, of course, did not go down well with the other five families that made up The Seven. They were incensed by this power grab, yet were not in a position to do much about it other than complain. However, this situation could change since resistance to Xiang Zu had started building out in the Belt. They needed to finish the job they'd started, and soon, before any of the other families saw it as an opportunity to stymie Xiang Zu's rise, and by extension threaten VanHeilding's grip on New World One.

His biggest fear, though, had been Luca's sudden departure from Mars in Sebastian VanHeilding's ship, after he had warned him not to meddle with her. Now Sebastian was dead and his crew in custody. Fredrick was certain Luca was heading out to New World One ready for a confrontation, a prospect he was not relishing. All his available resources, especially the node-runner contingent, were on high alert. But then, seemingly out of the blue, she'd turned the ship around and headed for Earth—bizarre. Now it was parked in Earth orbit directly over the mountain lair of the QI, Athena. Taunting the corporation to go and take it back. But so far they had resisted the temptation, fearing it might be a trap.

What was she up to? Luca and the QI were almost certainly plotting something, he was sure of that. Did she discover something on the ship to prompt this strange turnaround? Was there data on board that exposed some weak underbelly in the VanHeilding

organization? He had no idea. But on the upside, she wasn't coming out to New World One. That battle had been averted, at least for now.

He had been resting a little easier after this until he was informed by VanHeilding agents operating on Mars that they had lost track of Miranda and her comrades—except for Dr. Rayman, who had returned to Earth. This was another mystery for him to solve. How could they have simply disappeared? Were they still on Mars? Did this have anything to do with Luca? He had no idea, but he was pretty sure they were also plotting.

These were the problems that occupied Fredrick VanHeilding's mind as he observed an incoming comms alert from Lui Wei, the governor of Neo City, now on a Xiang Zu command ship near the Eugina sector and coordinating the takeover of the Belt. Several thoughts occurred to Fredrick at the same time as to why he was seeking a dialogue, and none of them were good. He gestured at the communicator, and a 3D projection of Lui Wei blossomed to life above the screen.

"We have a situation, Fredrick. One that requires our combined efforts to resolve."

Fredrick sat up and glared at the projection of Lui Wei. This straight-to-the-point greeting seemed very out of character. Something serious must have happened. "So what's the problem?"

"As you are probably aware, a tentative resistance movement is coalescing around Elektra. This in itself is not a major problem. We will simply establish a blockade and starve them into submission. A little medieval perhaps, but effective. However, a crew of mercenaries, under contract to Xiang Zu, have absconded with the QI core that was stolen from the Mars ship several months ago."

Fredrick jerked forward. "What? You can't be serious. I was under the assumption you had that thing locked down tight, in an underground bunker, with your scientists poking at it from behind the safety of a very long stick." He was not going to miss an opportunity to rub it into Lui Wei when he got the chance. "How could you let this happen?"

"Simple treachery, Fredrick. Something your family are only too familiar with." Lui Wei was sticking it right back at him.

Fredrick felt a twinge of anger at Lui Wei's audacity, but decided to let it go. He took a sip of tea to gather himself. "I take it this..."

crew of mercenaries are heading to Elektra?”

“We are not certain, but it seems likely. Perhaps they think the QI core can be used against us.”

Fredrick was becoming more alarmed at this development. Knowing that a QI core was out in the wild was not conducive to a good night’s sleep. “And can they?”

“No, not without the technical expertise, and no one on Elektra has the remotest idea how to activate a QI core. So, we’re safe in that respect. The broader issue is more how it could be used for propaganda. Elektra has already been reaching out to representatives of the lessor families, and we suspect that they are actively trying to pull Mars into the conflict.”

“Mars is no threat to us.” Fredrick waved a hand. “They know we could hobble any of their ships if we cared to.”

“Agreed. But we do not need a protracted conflict, we need to crush this resistance before it has a chance to grow. This is why we, Xiang Zu, are asking for you to provide us with a small team of your node runners so we can sniff out the location of the QI core and bring it back under our control.”

Fredrick considered this for a moment, a little longer than necessary so that Lui Wei could stew. “On two conditions,” he said at last.

“Name them.”

“One, is that they remain under VanHeilding command. And second, is that when you finally locate the QI core, you destroy it once and for all.”

It was Lui Wei’s turn to take a moment, while he considered these conditions. “Very well. How soon can you have them board a ship and rendezvous with us in the Eugina sector?”

“A few days, no more.”

“Good. I will await their arrival.”

The comms connection closed and the 3D projection snuffed out, leaving Fredrick VanHeilding with a vaguely disturbing feeling.

They should have destroyed that QI when they had the chance, he thought. Any prospect that it could be activated in this region would be a disaster. It was fortunate that he had node runners to spare.

Yet, Fredrick could feel the pieces being moved around the board but couldn’t make any sense of it. Were they all totally unconnected, just random events? Or was there some deeper

existential threat brewing?

He gave up trying to think it out and instead contacted Cortez Ramirez, his master node runner, with instructions to head out to the Eugina sector, find that QI core, and assist the Xiang Zu Corporation in any way possible to crush all resistance out in Elektra. For good measure, he authorized them to depart in his most well-armed ship and take as many battle-droids as needed to get the job done.

SUBZERO RESEARCH FACILITY

Luca stood motionless behind the cover of a broad, rocky outcrop a few hundred meters above a frigid, windswept valley floor. From this vantage point, she had a clear, unobstructed view of the VanHeilding genetic research facility. To her left, the valley stretched and broadened outward to a frozen sea. To her right, it rose to where the accommodation blocks were located. But for Luca, her attentions were primarily focused on a tall concrete structure housing a bristling antenna array.

Athena had given her use of a long-range personal transport, which she had flown all the way from the western edge of the North American continent. It was autonomous, under the control of the QI, so most of the journey here she had rested. Once past Newfoundland and out over the Labrador Sea, the craft entered stealth mode, with Athena hiding it from both satellite and ground-based traffic detection systems. From there she had taken it up over the Davis Strait and onto Baffin Bay, where it dropped altitude and skirted the tops of the waves and headed for the Greenland coast. She brought it into land without incident, in a barren, desolate area not far from the VanHeilding facility. Luca then packed herself into clothing more suited to subzero temperatures, slung a pack with her equipment over her shoulder, and walked for over two hours across a gap in a range of low hills to bring herself down to where she now stood.

Before she departed, the avatar handed back her now modified neural-lace, noticeably lighter and sleeker. Along with this, it also gave her a small, square metal box containing an antimatter bomb. Whether this had been recycled from the device that had been housed inside her neural-lace or a new creation, Luca wasn't sure. But just like the previous Damoclean sword that had literally hung over her head, this too could only be detonated by the QI, at a time of its choosing. The third item that the avatar presented her with was the pathogen analogue that Dr. Rayman had provided, now

fashioned into yet another QI-activated device. The fourth and final item was the drone, Fly, now restored with its full complement of toxic barbs.

Luca took off the pack and dug out the box containing the neural-lace. She opened the lid, extracted the lace, and placed it up under the base of her skull. She did all this with a slight sense of trepidation. Memories of lying on the operating table in Xenon's science institute back on Mars flashed in her mind. Would she be able to remove the lace once it activated? Had Athena tricked her again? In reality she knew it hadn't. The QIs may be many things, but they were at least true to their word. Yet, it wasn't as if she was completely off the hook. She carried in her pack an antimatter bomb remotely controlled by the QI. She was not free yet, not until she did what she came here to do.

Luca activated the lace and it took her a moment to adjust to the finer fidelity that this new lace afforded her. Soon she established a connection to a satellite that the QI had conveniently positioned a few hundred kilometers overhead, and through this she could now interact with Athena. Her visor began to populate her vision with AR details on terrain, weather, and a host of other data points. She reached into her pack again and this time brought out the drone, Fly. She activated it and set it on a flight path high up toward the facility, trusting that it would be too small to be detected.

Combined with the real-time satellite feed, the drone's sensors now fed Athena with data on security sensors and guard movements. After a few moments, her visor showed an array of new data including a potential path to her destination with the minimum potential for detection. She picked up her pack, slung it over her shoulder, and broke cover. She began following the AR path displayed on her visor.

This took her down the side of the valley along the southern edge of the facility. Her target destination was the antenna array building. This was situated farther away from the main complex, down toward the sea, possibly because the valley sides were much lower at this location. There were no doors anywhere to be seen on its surrounding walls—it could not be accessed from the surface. But there was a hatch on the flat roof to allow maintenance crews access to the antennae and communication dishes for servicing and upkeep. This led Luca to deduce that the building must be somehow connected to the main underground facility. And if she could get in

that way, she should be able to find her way to the data-vault.

She cautiously approached a narrow gate in the five-meter-tall chain-link perimeter fence. This was the closest access point to the antenna building. There were no guards or maintenance crews around, but there was a microwave motion detector curtain that ran around the entire fence. She would have to deal with that first.

Fly rose up and landed on top of the microwave transmitter tower covering this section. It scuttled down the side, deftly unscrewed an access panel, and disabled the beam. Luca moved forward and tested the gate; it opened. She went through and took cover behind one of the many shipping containers that had been stacked up around this sector. Fly reconnected the beam and flew over to rest on Luca's shoulder.

"So far so good," she whispered, her breath condensing in the frigid air. "Hopefully they won't have noticed that microwave going down, and if they do, they won't bother checking now that it's back up."

Luca moved off, following the route laid out on her AR visor, ducking into cover wherever she could. After a few short minutes, she arrived at the base of the antennae building. Sheer concrete walls rose up unbroken for ten meters on all sides. She took off her pack, opened it, and took out a gas-powered gun with a grappling hook inserted in its barrel. She took aim at the metal gantry structure surrounding the antennae, and fired. The hook sailed upward, trailing a light nylon rope in its wake. It clanged for a moment as it hit something, then caught. Luca pulled on it a few times to satisfy herself that it would hold her weight, then clipped the gun mechanism to the front of her belt, pressed the actuator, and the rope began to slowly rewind, pulling her up along the outer wall.

She clambered over the edge and dropped down onto the flat roof, then disentangled the hook and placed it back in her pack. Finally, she moved over to where the hatch was located. Beyond this point, she would be on her own. There would be no AR feed, no useful data overlays until she found a network node, which she hoped she could hack into and find a route to the data-vault.

She inspected the hatch and found a small access panel to one side. "Fly, see if you can take that apart and get this door open."

The drone dropped down onto the panel and went to work. A few moments later, Luca heard a whirring sound and the hatch door

slowly hinged open.

“Okay, let’s go check it out.”

She dropped down into a tangle of support structures. Metal girders crisscrossed the space, butting up against stout concrete supporting beams. Great columns of cabling snaked down the walls; she followed them and came to the next hatch, which had a simple turn-wheel locking mechanism. She opened it slowly, then dropped down another level to a room packed full of control and test equipment. “There’s got to be a network node in here somewhere. See if you can find it, Fly. I need to get out of this gear.”

Luca began stripping off the thick arctic clothing, including the AR visor. Underneath, she wore clothing typical of a VanHeilding lab technician. Around her neck hung a fake ID card. It would enable her to blend in with the general staff, so long as no one got too inquisitive.

Fly’s voice sounded in her head via the neural-lace. “I have located a node.”

Luca hurriedly stashed the winter clothing along with the heavy pack behind a tall test rack, then came over to where Fly had perched itself over the network node. She jacked-in.

Her cerebral cortex was instantly assailed by a cacophony of data, and it took her a moment to get a handle on it. Soon though, she had established a connection to one of the satellite dishes, allowing the QI Athena data access to the facility. More importantly, it enabled it to harvest all the data being periodically transmitted to backup locations around the globe. But that was the easy part of the mission—the hard part was yet to come.

Luca sifted through the internal data-stream, searching for the location of the data-vault that Athena had speculated should exist at this location. She breathed a sigh of relief when she found it, a vast server farm covering almost the entirety of one of the lower levels of the subterranean complex. The sheer volume of data stored there was astonishing.

Found it, she messaged Athena. *Creating a data pipe for you now.* Luca sought out the firewalls, and with Athena’s help, created a backdoor into the vast treasure trove of research and routed it to one of the satellite uplinks atop the antennae tower. Athena commenced harvesting.

But Luca was not finished yet; she still had a lot more to do. Next, she searched for the location of the bio-labs, specifically one

dealing with the most deadly of pathogens, one with Bio Level 4 security. She found it just a few levels below her current location and charted a route that avoided most of the security systems. For those that she couldn't avoid she would have to use her fake pass card, the details of which she now entered into the security system database, giving her top-level access to all areas. But she wanted to keep the use of this to a minimum, since such actions left a fingerprint, and to pull this off she wanted to leave absolutely nothing that could raise suspicion. She needed to be a ghost in the machine.

"Okay," Luca said finally, as she jacked out of the network node. "Time to go. Sorry, Fly, but I need to hide you away for a while."

The little drone tucked in its wings and folded itself up. Luca dropped it into a shoulder bag, similar to those used by the research facility's staff, complete with the VanHeilding insignia emblazoned on its flap.

Luca worked her way down the various levels of the antennae building, eventually exiting out onto the main bio-lab floor. Here, the corridors were bright and wide, with glass-paneled rooms along either side. She passed several people on her way, but no one paid her any notice.

She came at last to the security doors leading to the Bio Level 3 & 4 labs. She held her pass up to the door lock, it clicked open, and she entered a small room with a guard sitting in front of a row of monitors.

He glanced up at her, a little confused. "I wasn't expecting anyone else." He checked a screen. "There's a full team in there."

Luca gave an exasperated sigh and waved her ID card. "Check again, I should be on the access list. I'm just here to deliver an urgent item." She patted the shoulder bag.

Luca held her breath as the guard looked back at his computer screen. "That's odd. I see you now. How did I not spot that before?" He shook his head. "Sorry, I don't know how I missed that." He pressed a large red button on the bench, and the access door to Bio Level 3 & 4 opened.

Luca passed through into a short corridor. Both labs were accessed through a common set of locker rooms, one male, one female. Here, technicians would begin the arduous procedure of changing into full hazmat suits before entering the actual lab. But Luca didn't need to go that far. She entered the female locker room

and began searching for a suitable spot to hide the pathogen analogue that Dr. Rayman had provided her, now packaged with a remote trigger. She picked an air vent located below the low bench that ran along one side of the room. She removed the cover, gently inserted the device, and armed it. Luca then closed her eyes and focused on the data-stream. "Athena, I've activated the analogue device. Do you have access?"

"Yes," came the voice in her head. "Everything appears nominal. I have control."

"Good," replied Luca. "I'm moving on to the next objective."

A minute later she passed the security guard on the way out, offering him a nod. He nodded back, but with a curious look as if he had not quite made his mind up about her.

Her next objective would be considerably more complex, taking her all the way down to the lower levels of the complex and into the highly secure data-vault.

Yet she didn't really have to do this; she could leave now and still have all the research data. But her objective was nothing short of complete destruction; that was the only thing that would break the VanHeilding family. She kept going.

Her key card got her through the next series of security doors and she finally arrived at an elevator that would take her all the way down. Luca was breathing hard when she entered, feeling the adrenaline coursing through her body. She took a few deep breaths and tried to calm herself. She dropped her shoulder bag on the floor and rubbed her neck and shoulders.

The elevator stopped at an intermediate floor, the doors slid open, and in walked a young IT guy. He looked surprised when he saw her.

"Hi," he said as he glanced at the ID card hanging around her neck. "Don't get many lab techs in this sector. So, what brings you here?"

Luca couldn't decide if his suspicions were being raised or he was just making conversation. She decided to be vague and casual. "Yeah, it's like visiting a foreign country."

"Ha, you got that right. Complete with a different language." He paused for a beat as if considering something. "Say, you work in the Microbiology sector, you must know Rachael. How's she doing? I haven't seen her in a while."

Goddamnit, thought Luca, *why can't this guy just shut up*. Again,

she used her neural-lace and focused on the internal data-stream, searching for some details on this Rachael person, but she was getting flustered and couldn't focus.

"Rachael, eh...can't say I know her. I'm...new here, just started a while back." Luca could sense she was digging a hole for herself, and the longer she stayed in this elevator, the deeper it would get. She tapped the button for the next floor, one up from when she wanted to get to. But she needed to ditch this guy. The elevator glided to a halt, the doors slid open, and Luca exited. But she had only gone a few meters when she heard him call out.

"Hey, hold up."

Luca held her breath as she turned back to face him. He was holding up the shoulder bag. "You forgot this."

"Oh god, thanks." She took the bag from his outstretched hand, giving him her best smile in the process. "My life would be over if I lost that." She turned around and walked off, only looking back when she heard the elevator door closing again, and let out a long, slow breath when she saw the corridor empty. *Looks like I'm taking the stairs—and maybe I should ditch the lab coat*, she thought. But she had only taken a few steps toward the stairwell when all hell broke loose. An alarm siren split the air, and a strobe light started pulsing.

"What the..."

"This is a fire drill," a voice said overhead. "All personnel evacuate to the designated assembly point for their sector."

"I don't fucking believe it. A fire drill? Now?" She clasped a hand over the base of her skull, closed her eyes, and delved deep into the data-stream, searching for a way to deactivate the fire drill. Then a thought struck her. *Maybe this could help me. Everyone in this sector will be cleared out for at least ten to fifteen minutes.* Luca came back to the here and now, determined to push on, only for the elevator doors to open again and the same IT guy to step out.

"Hey, you gotta leave. It's a fire drill, come on." He beckoned frantically with one arm, urging her to follow him.

Luca couldn't believe it. What was it going to take to get rid of him? "Yeah, sure. You go ahead, I'll follow in a minute."

"We have to go now. They get very upset if people lag behind. Just letting you know, since you're new here."

"Thanks, but, eh...I gotta take a pee first."

"What? Now?"

"When you gotta go, you gotta go." Luca gave an apologetic

shrug. "You go, I don't want you getting into trouble on my account. I'll be up as soon as possible."

For a brief moment she thought he might argue with her again, but he had the good sense to know when he wasn't wanted. So he just nodded. "Uh, okay." And headed back into the elevator.

Luca quickly used her key card to duck into a store room and waited a few minutes for the sector to be cleared. Finally, she made her way down the stairs to the data-vault level.

The area was deserted. She worked her way between tall server racks, then kneeled and removed one of the floor panels that gave access to the mass of cabling that lay underneath. She hid the antimatter device under a particularly dense knot of cables and armed it. "Athena?" she said via her neural-lace. "Armed. Do you have control?"

"Affirmative," came the reply.

"Good. Time for me to get outta here."

Luca began making her way back to the elevator. With most, if not all, of the facility's staff now huddled around various evacuation points outside the complex, presumably cursing the fire drill as they froze in subzero temperatures, Luca met no one on her way to the antenna block, not even IT guy, whom she half expected to jump out at her from a doorway and berate her for not evacuating like the rest of the staff. But she didn't, and she made it back without incident.

A few minutes later, she was wrapped up again in her arctic clothing and making her way along the side of the valley. Two hours after that, she was back on board the transport preparing for takeoff.

She opened a comms channel to Athena. "It's done," she said. "Tell me you still have control."

"Yes, Luca. All systems inside the facility are under my control and the data harvesting is continuing."

"Good, good." Luca breathed a sigh of relief. "And you're not to trigger anything until I say so."

"Of course, as agreed."

"Oh, and make sure Dr. Rayman receives a copy of the data as soon as you've completed the harvesting. She's promised to keep it under wraps until we're ready to release to the wider world."

"Yes, I will ensure she gets a copy. Am I to assume that you are still going ahead with the rest of your plan?"

“Absolutely. Assuming Daedalus is still in orbit?”

“It is. The VanHeilding Corporation are being very cautious about approaching it. I suspect they think it is booby-trapped.”

Luca let out a long, slow breath as the transport rose up off the frozen tundra and began banking west out over Baffin Bay.

“This isn’t over yet, Athena,” she said after a while. “I want to be there when Fredrick VanHeilding watches the destruction of his empire, just so he fully understands who’s responsible for his downfall.”

“Very well, this is your choice to make. But should you fail in your mission, then the plan will still be activated. The facility will be destroyed and the data released.”

“I won’t fail, Athena. You can bet on that.”

Luca felt the craft pick up speed before dropping down to cruise low over the icy sea.

“Just so you know,” Athena continued, “there have been some interesting developments occurring in that region of the solar system. You may remember the QI core that was stolen a while back. It has now resurfaced and is in the hands of a group that is opposed to the takeover by both the VanHeilding and Xiang Zu corporations. This group is suspected to be joining forces with several others that are coalescing around Elektra in the asteroid belt.”

“Well, good luck to them. If you’re trying to get me to help them, then forget it. I’m not deviating from my mission, not for any reason.”

“I understand. But it transpires that the leader of this group, one Dakota Baird, is an old associate of your mother’s. He has reached out to her for help.”

The craft began to accelerate faster as it headed toward the Davis Strait. “And how did that go down?”

“Your mother, being the proactive person that she is, has orchestrated a mission to rendezvous with this group and attempt to secure the QI core. As I speak, a ship has just left Mars with Miranda, Scott, and Cyrus, along with a cohort of Martian military and some technical people.”

“I know what you’re trying to do, Athena—lure me into helping them. But it won’t work, it’s just a distraction. They’re more than capable of looking after themselves. I’m not going to be deviated from my objective.”

“Very well, just letting you know.”

“Okay, thanks for bringing me up to speed. But now, if you don’t mind, I’m utterly drained after that ordeal, so I’ll sign off.” Luca flicked off the comms channel, removed the neural-lace from the base of her skull, and promptly fell asleep.

NEWCOMERS

The Martian ship may have been experimental and high-tech, but it was damn slow. Miranda wondered if the budget had run out by the time they got to fitting out the business end of the craft. They'd left Mars thirty-nine sols ago with five trained military and two techs that supposedly knew their way around a QI core. So far, the journey had been tedious and dull apart from regular updates on how the conflict was playing out in the Belt. Mostly this involved a steady build-up around Elektra, with the odd skirmish here and there. Nobody was making any decisive moves just yet.

As for Luca, she had apparently left Earth orbit some time ago and was powering her way back out to the Belt, again. But as usual, any attempt made by either her or Scott to contact was met with stony silence. Even Aria was being vague as to what Luca had been doing on Earth, saying no more than she went to visit Athena. However, she had also visited Steph, that much Miranda found out from the doctor herself. But she suspected that even she was not telling the full story.

Now, Luca was charging across the solar system in the same stolen ship, presumably with plans of taking on Fredrick VanHeilding at New World One. *Well, good for her, she thought. I hope she sticks it to him.*

This, of course, did not help Miranda or anyone on this ship with their current mission. At best it might distract the Xiang Zu Corporation. But they may also see Luca's actions as yet another opportunity to grab more power; it could embolden them to push for a quick resolution to the conflict out here. That is, of course, if they were actually aware of Luca's power, and her singular desire to take down the VanHeilding patriarch.

Scott's voice popped in her earpiece comm. "Miranda."

"Yeah, what is it?" She was down in the armory checking out some of the equipment that the Martians had supplied them with.

"Just received an encrypted message from our pirate friend with a set of coordinates for a rendezvous."

“About time. I was beginning to think he had disappeared and we would never hear from him again. Elektra, I presume?”

“Actually, no. It looks like an old spaceport out in the Berbericia sector.”

Miranda considered this for a moment. “Can’t say I know much about that area.”

“I do. I was at that spaceport, long time ago, collecting processed ore for the New World One build. It used to be a big, busy port, but most of that area of the asteroid belt was mined out long ago. By the time I was there the place was very rundown, ready to be decommissioned.”

“Sounds like the perfect place for a smuggler’s hideout.”

“If it’s the same place I’m thinking of, then it’s a fairly long way from Elektra. We could be exposed, and it might be hard to defend if we’re attacked.”

“Maybe so, Scott. But it looks like that’s where we’re going. Can you send a reply to confirm?”

“Already done.”

Cyrus was not happy. Any inter-ship communications, encrypted or not, could be intercepted. Anyone out there snooping could triangulate its source, even if they couldn’t decipher the message.

“We’ve no choice, Cyrus.” Miranda was adamant. “How else are we know where to go? Anyway, I thought this ship is node-runner proof.”

“It is. It can’t be hacked like the Perception was on the way to Mars. But comms is like leaving a scent, a trail to follow.”

They had assembled on the bridge along with the Martian military captain, Ed Rickmann, and the two techs. On the central holo-table a 3D projection of the old spaceport blossomed out from its surface. It was a gnarled mess of docking platforms, storage bunkers, workshop bays, all radiating out from a semi-derelict central core of utility structures, topped off with a sizable artificial gravity torus—now completely stationary relative to the rest of the structure. Jutting out from the central core via flimsy gantries were what looked like a squat power station and an improbable collection of dish antennae. There were no navigation beacons, no lights, nothing to indicate that this was anything other than a derelict hulk.

“Doesn’t look very inviting,” Miranda said as she studied the

image.

“Picking up some thermal activity,” said one of the techs, his eyes focused on a data screen. “Looks like they’ve got power, and there’s definite human activity within the central structure.”

“See any ship?” asked Scott.

“Not so far,” the tech replied.

“There’s plenty of old workshop bays where they could keep a small ship hidden and out of the way.” Captain Rickmann pointed in the general direction of the spaceport.

“It would be really useful if we could communicate,” Scott said, glancing over at Cyrus.

“We don’t need to,” said Miranda. “We’re here now, so I suggest we give it a quick flyby then take the shuttle and bring it in somewhere close to the central structure.” She turned to Rickmann. “What do you think?”

The captain screwed his mouth up. “Let’s do the flyby first, and see. Hopefully they’ll know it’s us and won’t start taking potshots.”

The ship began a slow circumnavigation of the derelict spaceport at a safe distance, scanning for any more signs of activity.

“There,” said Scott, pointing at the image on the ship’s main monitor. “Navigation lights.”

They were now on the opposite side of the spaceport, and high up on the central structure was a wide docking platform with two navigation beacons flashing on either side.

“That’s where they want us to enter,” said Miranda, moving closer to the monitor to get a better look.

“Okay, time to suit up,” snapped Rickmann. “We’ll take the shuttle in close, drop it down on that platform, but keep it ready to lift off again just in case things get hairy.”

A few minutes later, Miranda, Scott, and Cyrus were exiting the shuttle and clamping their mag-boots onto the metal surface of the landing platform. Ahead of them, Captain Rickmann and two other Martian military were cautiously moving toward the airlock door. It hissed open and out came three scruffy looking crew. Their EVA suits were a patchwork of mismatched spare parts. One stepped forward and beckoned for them to enter the airlock.

“Is that him?” Scott asked across the general comm channel.

“Let’s find out,” said Miranda as she worked her way forward

and approached the motley crew. When she got within a meter, she recognized the face of Dakota Baird. He gave her a big, toothy smile accompanied by a wave of his hand. He then pointed at his helmet and signaled that he couldn't communicate.

Miranda signaled that she understood.

"Have we found our man?" Scott asked over their own comm network.

"Yep, that's him. I'd recognize that scumbag anywhere."

Dakota now signaled to follow him into the cargo airlock.

They piled in, let it cycle through its compression routine, and exited into a surprisingly bright, and relatively tidy, former cargo hold. Helmets were removed. Now they could talk.

"Miranda." Dakota's voice was deep and sonorous. "I see the years have been kind to you. You're as radiant as ever." He gestured expansively.

"Cut the crap, Dakota. We've just spent forty-five sols of the most tedious space travel ever experienced, so you better not be bullshitting us about this QI core."

Dakota's face took on a hurt look. "Ah...down to business. Another part of you that hasn't changed with age. Very well, let's dispense with the pleasantries and get on with the main event. This way, follow me." He nodded to his comrades and began working his way along the cargo-hold walkway. Miranda noticed several more of Dakota's crew float out from the shadows, like the ghosts of long-departed mercenaries, and follow along beside them. Most had a hungry, desperate look about them. They all carried plasma pistols and no doubt an assortment of other concealed weapons.

"Hungry looking lot," Scott whispered.

"Yeah, not to be messed with. But still, they'd probably put up a good fight if they had to."

They didn't go far. The QI core had been stashed in an adjoining cargo hold that looked like it was also being used as the crew's living space. Tethered to the walls were a wide assortment of sleeping nets, some with crew still in them, although they were all now wide awake and focused on the newcomers.

"Here it is." Dakota swept an arm toward a sizable, hi-tech container around three meters square. "The most sought-after object in the system."

Cyrus approached and began to examine the crate.

"This better work," Miranda heard someone say from the edge

of the group, which now seemed to comprise the entirety of Dakota's crew. They gathered around, watching with eager anticipation as Cyrus commenced his inspection—joined now by herself and Scott.

"Is it the real deal?" Miranda asked.

"I'll tell you in a minute, as soon as I can get this open." Cyrus fiddled with an access panel on the side of the container. He tapped it a few times and the screen illuminated. This elicited a low murmur from the assembled crew, who were inching ever closer to the action.

"This should be it." Cyrus tapped a code onto the screen.

The container gave a slight hiss as it split around the edges and the sides began to slowly hinge open. A faint cloud of vapor escaped and floated motionless in the still air, partially obscuring the contents of the crate. Cyrus leaned in and began waving it away to reveal a squat cylindrical object, which Miranda instantly recognized as the stolen QI core.

The assembled crew were now bunched together, bobbing and maneuvering to get a better view of this mystical object. It was a moment of awe for them, a moment where the myth of the quantum intelligence had been made a little more real.

Cyrus moved over to the second crate with the superluminal comms unit, opened it, and gave it a quick check. He finally nodded his approval. "I need to run a few tests, but first impressions look good. I think we have a functioning core."

"Good," Dakota announced. "When can we get it online, get it operational?"

"Woah, not so fast." Cyrus looked over at him. "We've got a lot to do. This is just a core, designed to be plugged into an existing infrastructure that was built for it on New World One. We're gonna need a whole lot of work before this baby can do its thing."

This seemed to come as a major surprise to the crew.

"That's not what you told us, Dakota."

"Yeah, you said it just needed to be switched on."

Dakota raised a hand to quiet down the rabble, and turned back to Cyrus. "So, what do you need, and how long is it going to take?"

Cyrus stepped down from the edge of the crate. "We'll need power, and lots of it. We'll also need a decent comms link, one that can jack-in to the grid, with plenty of bandwidth."

"How long?"

Cyrus shrugged. "As long as it takes to put that together."

"Aeon. Brooker," Dakota called out to the crew.

"Here, boss." A thin, older-looking guy floated into view along with a young woman with a useful-looking plasma pistol clipped to her waist.

"Show the newcomers where the old power and comms are on this tub. Maybe they can get it to work."

"What are you using for energy at the moment?" asked Scott.

"We're routing power from the ship," said Brooker. "It was a quick fix, just to get things up and running."

Cyrus shook his head. "Okay, well, we'd better get started."

ONE MORE THING

The VanHeilding frigate, now drafted in to help the Xiang Zu Corporation in its efforts to find the missing QI core and bring the conflict in the region to a close, was proceeding at a steady clip toward Elektra, the quadruple asteroid system. However, the primary asteroid was not the ultimate destination, since this was not permanently populated due to its feeble gravity. Most of what people referred to as Elektra was in fact an archipelago of space stations, spaceports, and factory units that had grown together over the decades to form the second-largest populated habitat in the region.

Elektra, like most second cities, always had a rebellious streak. It had never been one to kowtow to the central Belt authority on Ceres—now relocated to New World One. So in many respects, it was understandable that it should become the focus point for every scumbag, mercenary, low-life, and refugee in the system. They were all gravitating toward it like a meteor storm, all hell-bent on putting up a fight. But soon it would be over and all those anarchists would be whipped into shape, whether they liked it or not.

Cortez Ramirez, the ship's commander, almost felt sorry for them as he gazed out of the wide viewing windows on the tactical deck of the frigate. They were still several Earth-days away from arriving at Elektra but he was in no rush. The primary objective of the ship was currently being conducted by a cohort of node runners operating from a section of the ship specifically engineered for such operations. They were all strapped down, jacked-in to the grid, and busy sniffing out ship movements and comms traffic. Their focus was on anything that might give Cortez a clue as to the whereabouts of the treacherous mercenary Dakota Baird, and ultimately, the location of the lost quantum intelligence core.

"Sir," a voice came through on his internal comms unit.

He tapped the side of his head below the right ear to reply. "Go ahead."

"We may have something. A node runner intercepted a comms

signal from an unknown ship bound for Elektra. After some further probing, it was established that the ship is hardened against node-runner attack."

"I see." Cortez stroked the long goatee that sprouted from his chin. "And who might possess such a ship?"

"Most likely, it's Martian."

"Interesting. Do we know who they were communicating with? What was being transmitted?"

"No, the message was quantum-encrypted. It seems to have come from another ship in the Berbericia sector. But that only came alive on transmission and went dead immediately after, no way to trace it."

"A dead ship, very curious. And where is this Martian ship now?"

"Its course has deviated, taking it away from Elektra, out toward the last known location of the dead ship."

"A Martian ship, a quantum-encrypted signal, all very curious." He wheeled around and brought up a system map on the holo-table. "Send me all the location data you have on that region."

Instantly, the map reoriented itself to show the mystery ship's location and vector, and the estimated source of the initial signal. Cortez zoomed in and brought up a data-sheet on the nearest habitable objects in that sector. One piqued his interest, and he gestured to bring up more visual detail. An old derelict spaceport blossomed out over the holo-table, abandoned a long time ago and as such largely forgotten about.

"Well, well." Cortez stroked his goatee again. "Looks like a good place for a clandestine rendezvous. I think we may have found you, Mr. Baird."

He gestured to bring the data up onto the main bridge monitor for all to see. "Any Xiang Zu ships in that area?" he called over to one of the techs.

The chart zoomed way out from the spaceport and several data points flashed up on the chart, each one representing the location of a ship. "The closest is a transport en route to Elektra. It's approximately two days away from that location."

"Okay, alert them that we may have a possible location for Dakota Baird and his crew, and send them all the details."

"Aye, aye, sir."

"One more thing, sir," the node-runner operator's voice returned

in Cortez's internal comms.

"Yes, go ahead."

"There is another vessel...eh, a VanHeilding ship heading toward the Belt."

"So."

"It's Daedalus, the one that was stolen from Sebastian VanHeilding, sir."

Cortez froze. *She's back*, he thought. That thorn in the side of the entire family. "Any guesses on its ultimate destination?" he asked, even though he already knew.

"New World One, sir."

"Okay, I'll alert them. In the meantime, keep tabs on it but under no circumstances are you to probe it. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

He closed the comms connection. *Goddamnit*, he thought, *why do I have to be the one to inform Fredrick VanHeilding.*

XIANG ZU

Over the course of a few days, Cyrus, and the Martian techs that had traveled here with them, worked with Aeon and Brooker to figure out what could be salvaged in the old spaceport and what it would take to restart the reactor. This turned out to involve a convoluted process of kickstarting ignition utilizing the reactor on board Dakota's ship. The only caveat according to Cyrus was that that ship would be out of commission for quite some time. How long, he wouldn't say. It depended on a number of factors that Miranda made no attempt to understand. As far as she was concerned, if Dakota needed to temporarily sacrifice his ship for the cause, then so be it. Needless to say, he wasn't happy, nor were his crew. But they had come this far so there was no backing out now.

Miranda spent the evenings on board the Martian ship, along with the others, rather than get friendly with the locals. Mostly this was about avoiding a situation with Dakota that wasn't purely discussing operational issues. She still hadn't forgiven him for screwing her over. And she probably never would.

Yet, one evening, circumstances conspired to bring them into contact. Scott and Captain Rickmann were somewhere in the sprawling spaceport along with some of the military team reviewing the setup of defensive positions, just in case their location was discovered before the QI went live, and they somehow came under attack. Cyrus, as usual, was over at the reactor with most of the techs, trying to get it operational.

Miranda found herself on the deserted bridge of the Martian ship. She had been surveying some data on Elektra when a comms came in from Dakota requesting urgent supplies of water. Some accident had apparently occurred to drastically diminish their current supplies. Miranda's initial reaction was to ignore it, but there was a genuine tone in his voice.

He can wait until morning, she thought. Then again, he did sound desperate, and it wouldn't put her out too much to do it now.

She gave a sigh and tapped the comms channel. "Miranda here,

what's the problem?"

"Ah...Miranda, thanks. Eh...our water supply has somehow become contaminated. It's a bit of a long story, but the thing is, it's not going to go down very well with the rest of the crew when they come back off duty. They're giving me enough guff already about sacrificing the ship's reactor. I'm trying to avoid pissing them off even more."

"The trials and tribulations of command, Dakota. No one thanks you for anything."

"Tell me about it."

"Okay, I'll send you over some from our stores. Hopefully that should fend off an insurrection."

"Thanks."

A few moments later, Miranda was floating into the cargo airlock of the spaceport pushing a bulk container with a thousand liters of H₂O. Dakota was waiting on the other side and was clearly surprised to find her doing the delivery by herself. She flipped her visor open. "Here you go. Hope this sorts your command crisis out."

He grasped a handle on the container. "I really appreciate this, but you didn't have to come yourself, you could have sent a minion."

"There's nobody else on board to do it, nobody that's awake that is, and...well, I think you and I need to clear the air. We've been tiptoeing around each other for the last few days. Scott's convinced we had an affair."

Dakota raised an eyebrow. "Really? Well, I'm open to persuasion." He grinned.

"Cut the crap, Dakota. I'm being serious here."

He raised a hand. "My apologies." He lowered his head like he was considering how to respond. "Look, I really appreciate you taking my message seriously and responding to it. I'll admit it was a long shot, considering all that happened."

"You knew that any mention of a QI core was going to get me involved, no matter our past."

"It's what I gambled on. And, well...what happened in the past is best left there. What more is there to say?" He gave a shrug.

"Perhaps," Miranda agreed, her voice conciliatory. "But what I'd like to know is why you did it. Why did you steal from me? You knew what would happen."

Dakota took a deep breath. "Look, I know you'll think this is bullshit, but the truth is it wasn't actually me that did the job on you."

Miranda raised her eyebrows. "Part of the cargo we were transporting for Sicon Industries went for a walk, on your watch." She shook her head. "You have no idea what hell I went through after that. It nearly ruined my security business. Who's going to contract a company to keep things safe, if they can't actually do what they say?"

Dakota raised a hand. "I know, I know, but you were very quick to pin it on me."

Miranda could feel the anger rising before she stopped herself. What would be the point? After all, it was she who wanted to keep things on a professional level. "Someone had to take the fall, Dakota."

They were silent for a while as they pushed the container into an area of the spaceport they were using as a makeshift galley.

"It was Johansson and his crew that did it," Dakota eventually said. "I found out a few months after."

"Johansson? But he had left my crew at least a month before the stuff went missing."

"Exactly, but he still knew the procedures, what contracts we had on, all that. To his credit, he planned well, including having me take the fall."

"That slimy bastard." She shook her head. "I should have known." She looked over at Dakota, who was strapping down the container. "You're not spinning me a line of bullshit on this?"

Dakota shrugged. "Look, if I did it, I'd say so. What does it matter now anyway?" He gestured toward the cargo bay with the QI core.

Miranda considered this. He had a point, and she hated to admit it. That was all in the past. Now they had bigger problems on their hands.

"So now you've gone all freedom fighter," said Miranda as she watched him connect a water line to the container. "How did that happen?"

"Believe it or not, it was during a card game." He looked over and gave her a wry smile.

"What, don't tell me. This is all because you lost a bet?"

"Ha...no, nothing like that. We were holed up over at the Dillon

Waystation, and I overheard some refugees from Eugina. They were on their way to Elektra to join the resistance and were hunting for information on the stolen QI. Strange as it may seem, but up until then I hadn't given any thought to what we were carrying in our cargo hold. A job's a job, and all that. Then...well, something kinda opened up in my head, you know. Call it an epiphany, a sudden realization that my life, with all the ducking and diving, was just so much bullshit. And at that moment I felt a need to do something with more...meaning, I suppose. Something that felt...right."

Miranda cocked her head at him. "This better not be another line of crap, Dakota. Because I'm almost beginning to like the new you."

His face grew serious. "No. No crap. The thing is, I got family on Elektra, a brother, married with kids. He's just an ordinary guy, nothing special. Yet he's chosen to throw his lot in with the resistance, stand up and fight for what he believes. And we're talking about a guy who doesn't know one end of a plasma weapon from the other." Dakota lowered his head and gave a shrug. "At the end of the day, I think it was him that made me think about what matters."

"And what's that?"

"People, Miranda. People not getting crapped on by those who just don't give a damn."

Miranda's comm pinged. She held a hand up to Dakota to let him know, and cupped the other over one ear as she responded to the comms. "Yeah, go ahead."

"Where are you?" It was Scott. He was still on the station going over defenses with the captain.

"I'm on the station. Dakota had a H2O crisis so I brought some over. Why? What's the problem?"

"Operations just pinged a ship approaching us, at speed. It could be trouble. Meet us at the cargo airlock. We're heading back to the ship."

"Will do." She turned back to Dakota. "There's trouble heading our way, I gotta get back to the ship."

"Trouble?"

"An unknown ship, coming in fast. You'd better start manning the barricades, just in case."

Miranda deactivated her mag-boots and propelled herself toward the airlock door. Scott, Rickmann, and several of the crew were

already there when she arrived. They bundled themselves in and waited while the airlock cycled through the decompression routine. When they stepped out onto the platform, the autonomous shuttle was already opening its side doors and getting ready to take them over to the ship, which was parked in a stationary position relative to the spaceport, around five hundred meters away.

But before anyone had taken another step, out from the blackness of space an incandescent ball of plasma hurtled toward them. It was so fast that nobody had time to react before it slammed into the ship. The blast hit the starboard engine bay and enveloped it in a blinding burst of high-energy chaos. The bay shattered in a cloud of exploding gases, sending chunks of metal in all directions.

“Quick, back inside,” Rickmann shouted out. “Before we get hit by debris.”

Miranda scrambled backward into the airlock, but just before the doors closed, she watched the shuttle get slammed by the oncoming debris field. It bucked and spun out of control off the platform.

“It’s been hit,” someone shouted, just as the doors finally shut. They could feel the *thump, thump* of chunks of broken ship slamming against the outer door as the airlock cycled through its compression routine.

Rickmann began shouting commands into his comm. “Get those plasma cannon into action, I want firepower. And get a location on that ship.”

They made their way to where the QI core had been stored. An operations room had been set up there over the last few days, more by convenience than by design. A tech operated a bank of monitors, feverishly working through multiple feeds trying to get a lock on the attackers. Dakota was also there, shouting instructions to the crew to take up defensive positions.

“Got it, Captain,” the tech called out.

“Why aren’t our cannon firing?” Rickmann demanded. “What’s the goddamn holdup?”

“Eh...we have a power problem,” said the tech, a little sheepishly. But before anyone could respond, a second blast hit the reactor building.

“Cyrus, where the hell is Cyrus?” Miranda looked anxiously at Scott, as the engineer was not responding to her comms.

"It's okay, he's out of there." Scott had no sooner finished the sentence when Cyrus and his team burst in.

"We've a power problem," Captain Rickmann shouted over to him as he entered. "We've no plasma cannon, we can't fire back."

"We've got a limited energy supply, they just need to charge, give it a few more seconds."

"Ship status?" Rickmann call out to the tech.

"Still no response, sir. They're dead in the water."

"Keep trying. There has to be someone still alive on it."

Miranda, like many of the others in the operations room, had been focusing her attention on the monitor feeds. Scenes of chaos unfolded as a third blast hit the docking port superstructure, sending more super-heated shrapnel in all directions and shredding even more sections of the spaceport.

"They're trying to blast us into oblivion," she murmured, just as another blast hit the crippled ship again, this time opening a wide hole in its underbelly. She shook her head. "The ship's gone. No way to salvage that."

Finally, the defensive cannon had reached max power and began firing. Three plasma blasts streaked across the open space toward the attacking ship. Two sailed past harmlessly, but a third hit the nose of the ship, encasing it, for a brief second, in a mesh of high-intensity plasma. But the ship seemed undamaged.

"Keep firing, keep firing," the captain shouted.

But something must have hit home, as the ship slowed, then began to bank away.

"It's changing course, sir."

Another plasma blast streaked across its bow as a second struck the forward undercarriage. Again, the ship seemed undamaged, but it continued its maneuver and then began to retreat.

"Moving away, sir. I think it's backing off."

There was an audible sigh of relief from the assembled crew in the operations room. They would live to fight another day. They had beaten off the attack, for now. But their location was known; there would be another attack soon, probably with more ships, probably one they couldn't fight off.

"How the hell did they find us?" Dakota gestured at the monitors in the operations room. It was some time later, and full assessment of the damage was still in progress.

“Comms. Has to be that,” said Cyrus. “It’s the only weak point with the ship. They must have been sifting through communication traffic in this sector.”

“Maybe they have node runners,” Scott considered.

“That was a Xiang Zu ship. Only VanHeilding uses node runners.” Miranda shook her head.

“Then perhaps VanHeilding sees this rogue QI as a top priority, so it donates a team to help them seek it out,” Scott continued.

“What the heck is a node runner?” Dakota looked confused.

Miranda rattled off a quick definition. “Genetically enhanced humans with the ability to jack-in to the grid and manipulate the data-stream through thought alone.”

“Jesus, are you serious? They can actually do that?” Dakota’s eyebrows rose halfway up his forehead.

“Yep. They can take over almost any system.” Miranda gestured in the vague direction of the crippled ship. “That ship we came here in has been hardened against a node-runner attack. That’s the reason we can’t control it remotely, the reason it doesn’t have an AI. But as Cyrus said, the only weak point is comms.”

Dakota shook his head. Clearly he was having difficulty comprehending this revelation.

Over the next hour they set about assessing the damage to the spaceport, and more importantly, to the ship. Eventually, Captain Rickmann decided to address everyone and bring them up to speed.

“Okay, listen up.” Rickmann faced them holding a slate, which he started reading from. “Still no response from the ship and no way to remotely interrogate it to assess damage other than visually. Starboard engine is gone, we presume the port engine is too. Undercarriage is nonexistent, so we’re assuming all internal atmosphere has been expelled. It’s also slowly drifting away from us.” He glanced up from the slate for a second. “That’s probably better than moving toward us, with the potential to smash into the station.”

“And the shuttle?” Miranda asked.

He shook his head. “Dead, major structural damage. And drifting away from us at a rate of seven-point-two kilometers per hour.”

“What about my ship?” Dakota asked. “It’s still in the maintenance hangar.”

“Fortunately, it seems your ship has suffered no damage. So we

still have that as a life raft.”

“Well then, let’s get the hell outta here and head for Elektra.” Aeon had joined the group, hovering close to Dakota, along with several others of his crew.

“That’s five, maybe six days away,” said Scott. “How far do you think we’ll get before we’re blasted into vapor by Xiang Zu?”

“We could make it,” Aeon said, a little feebly.

“There’s a ship out there just waiting.” Miranda pointed in the general direction of the attack. “As soon as we leave it will be after us, and judging by the damage it did so far, I don’t think your ship will be any match for it.”

“So, we just sit here and let them gather their forces and attack us again?” Aeon suggested.

“Well, I’d rather go down fighting than get vaporized cowering inside a ship.” Angus looked to Dakota, then to the others in the crew.

“Yeah, me too,” said Tamires. “Let’s take a few of the bastards down with us.”

“We would have a chance if we could just get the QI activated,” said Scott, and all eyes turned to Cyrus.

“Eh...the antenna array is completely destroyed, and the reactor building is damaged.” Cyrus screwed his mouth up and shook his head. “It’s simply not possible, with the limited time we have. That ship will be back soon, probably with a load of its buddies.”

“It doesn’t need to connect to the wider grid,” Scott considered. “If we could get it powered up and simply operating on the local broadcast radius of the spaceport, that could be enough for it to disable any ship that comes within attacking range.”

Again, Cyrus screwed his mouth up and thought about this for a moment. “Well, if we’re all agreed that we’re not going to try and make a run for Elektra, then I suppose we could somehow try and scrounge enough power to get it partially activated.”

“What about the ship’s reactor? Maybe it survived. Could we use that?” All eyes turned to the tech.

Cyrus nodded slowly. “Possible, but how? It’s floating away from us.”

“We use my ship,” said Dakota. “I can get it close enough to get someone over to the wreck. Then we can find out what’s salvageable.”

There was silence in the room for a moment as each of them

started coming to terms with what their options were. Make a run for Elektra and try and beat the odds of being blown to bits by a fleet of Xiang Zu ships. Or hunker down in the spaceport and fight it out to the bitter end.

“Is it possible to bring that ship in and dock it to the spaceport?” said Miranda.

“Are you crazy,” said Rickmann. “There was a reason we didn’t do this when we arrived.”

“That was so we didn’t damage the ship. But we’re way past that now.” She turned to Dakota. “Could you do it, using your ship as a tug?”

“I could do it,” Scott jumped in. “That’s what I was doing for several years, shifting ore barges around, docking, undocking. If your ship has reasonable reaction control then I’m pretty sure I could do it.”

They looked at each other for a moment.

“Okay,” Miranda finally announced. “We get it back and physically docked. That way we can work faster.”

Rickmann swung around to face Miranda. “How do you know the reactor on that ship isn’t about to go critical? Because if it does, it’ll take this entire station with it.” He gestured wildly with his arms.

“If it is, then we’re screwed anyway,” Cyrus intervened.

“Dakota, want to give it a go?” Scott looked over at the mercenary.

He opened his hands in a gesture. “If you think you can do it, then my ship is yours.”

“Cyrus, you’re coming with me, and you too Miranda.” Scott pointed at both of them in turn. “We’ll need some people suited up and on rope duty.”

“Ropes?” Miranda looked confused.

“We’re docking a dead ship. Trust me, we’ll be doing this the old-school, time-honored way.”

GODFORSAKEN UNIVERSE

Scott took the smuggler's ship out to where the Martian craft drifted. Several of Dakota's crew then went EVA and attached a number of tethers to the hull. As soon as they were clear, Scott gently pushed the dead ship with the blunt nose of Dakota's ship toward the spaceport. Then the tricky part came. He reversed thrust to take up the slack on the tethers and slow it down. All the time he worked with the small, omnidirectional gas thrusters, which made for precise but painfully slow progress.

At one point, very close to the docking truss, he lost control and the rear end of the ship swung out wildly, putting an enormous strain on the tethers. This sent Miranda and the others, who were suited up and waiting on the truss to attach ropes to the hull and secure it in place, all scrambling for safety. But the tethers held, Scott regained control, and a short time later they had it secured to the dock. An umbilical was then connected to the auxiliary docking port on the Martian ship. They pressurized the access tunnel along the dock, and finally they could enter the ship and do a full damage inspection. This still required them to be in EVA suits when passing through the airlock from the docking tunnel, but at least now they could work with speed. Miranda was first on board along with Cyrus, Rickmann, and two techs. They were met with a lot of debris floating in the interior, including the body of one of the crew who had been on board and sleeping at the time of the attack.

They made their way to the bridge and Cyrus began checking out the systems. He plugged in a portable diagnostics terminal, tapped a few commands, and the bridge flickered to life with a multitude of illuminated displays, audible alerts, and flashing warnings.

"I take it the reactor is still functioning, then?" said Miranda.

"This is just from auxiliary power, but it's looking promising." He swiveled his head to look back at her and the captain. "I think we're in luck."

Rickmann glanced around at the floating detritus. "I wouldn't

call this luck.”

Over the next few hours, Cyrus and the tech team worked to route power from the ship, utilizing the existing cabling that ran the length of the docking truss, into the operations room where the QI core was located.

Scott brought Dakota’s ship back into the maintenance hangar, which they reckoned was the safest place to put it. This was an enclosed space, so the ship couldn’t be seen, and hopefully couldn’t be targeted. It was probably the reason it had survived the first attack. Dakota and his crew then busied themselves removing the exterior plasma cannon and relocating it to a location on the spaceport that needed more coverage.

Miranda and Captain Rickmann worked on a defensive plan, which involved several fallback levels. The first line of defense were the plasma cannons, of which they had four, including the one from Dakota’s ship. They considered trying to get the one on the Martian ship operational, but it was destroyed when the undercarriage was hit.

If this first line was breached and Xiang Zu tried to infiltrate the actual spaceport, then it would be down to small weapons fighting, and pulling back into the operations room, where they would make a last stand. Already, most of the access points were being welded shut and barricades and obstacles placed along the corridors to slow any advance and provide cover for a retreat. They just had to hold out and hope that Cyrus could do the impossible, and get the QI operational.

“Here you go, thought you might be hungry.” Scott floated over to Miranda and offered her a ration pouch.

Miranda wiped her hands on her jacket and reached out. “Thanks, I’m starving.” She tore the cap off and took a mouthful of the thick glucose and protein goo. “How’s Cyrus doing?”

“Stressed. Best not go near him at the moment.”

“Does he think it can be done, get the QI operational?”

Scott cocked his head. “I’ll be honest, I think it’s fifty-fifty.”

“Then we’re screwed, aren’t we?”

“We’ve been in tighter spots.” He grinned. “We’ll find a way.”

They were quiet for a time, both eating, both looking around at the feverish preparations going on all around them.

"I wonder where Luca is now?" Miranda said between mouthfuls of food. "Did she make it to New World One?"

"Yeah, she's probably fighting her own battles as we speak."

"I hope she has better odds than we have."

"Quiet! Quiet!"

They looked over at the central hub to see Captain Rickmann waving a hand to quiet everybody down. He then looked back at the bank of monitors and listened to something the tech was saying. He relayed the message.

"They're back...two ships... No, make that three...closing in fast...within range in seven minutes."

Everybody directly involved in the defense scrambled to their stations.

Scott looked back at Miranda. "Time to get the game face on."

The first barrage came a little after the seven-minute mark. All three ships fired multiple plasma blasts, not all of which struck home as the attacking craft were still some distance out. Of the blasts that found their target, damage was marginal, yet the entire spaceport shook with the impacts.

But this time they were ready. Four exterior-mounted plasma cannon let rip, pounding out a barrage of high-energy plasma, all directed at the lead ship. Most went wide of the mark, sailing harmlessly off into the void. One grazed the underbelly of the ship, effecting minimal damage. But one slammed directly into its bow. A cheer went up in the operations room where many were now gathered, watching events play out on the monitors.

But the ships kept advancing, retargeted their weapons on the spaceport's gun emplacements. One was knocked out completely, and one lost targeting capability, but only momentarily.

"Miranda." Scott came up beside her at the tech station. "Cyrus has a problem, needs our help." He jerked his head over at the engineer, who seemed to be tracking a bunch of thick cables that hung across the cargo bay.

"What's the problem?"

"There's a drop-off in power from the ship's reactor. It happened just after the first barrage. He thinks it's a high-impedance short."

"I've got no idea what that means," Miranda replied. "Give it to me in English."

"We need to check the cables all the way back to the ship. They

might have gotten twisted up, or some debris could have lodged in one of them.”

Miranda sighed. “Okay, let’s get to it.”

They moved off and down to the lower dock level through an access tunnel, following the thick, armored cable that ran as far as an industrial junction box. This is where it was connected to the exterior dock cabling. They passed through a small maintenance airlock and out onto the underside of the main docking truss. This was a wide metal superstructure crisscrossed with beams and support joists.

“This is it.” Scott pointed at a wide line of ducting that ran the entire length of the dock. Flashes of plasma fire lit up the superstructure as they followed the cabling, looking for damage.

“There!” Scott shouted. “Up ahead.”

The overhead docking platform had taken a hit, creating a tangled web of bent and broken metal.

“This looks bad,” said Miranda as she tried to make sense of the mess.

Scott moved around, inspecting it from different sides. “All the wiring is still intact, but it’s been skewered by this broken joist. That’s probably what’s causing the short. We just need to pull it out. Come on, give me a hand.”

But Miranda hesitated for a beat as she looked out toward the attacking ships. They had stopped firing. Odd.

“What is it?” Scott asked, looking up at her.

Miranda didn’t reply immediately; she was transfixed by a series of glistening specks that spewed out from one of the ships. “Scott, look. Do you see what I see?”

Scott glanced up at the ships and studied the specks growing in size as they sped toward them. “I could be wrong,” he said, “but that looks suspiciously like a swarm of battle-droids—heading our way.”

Miranda grabbed his arm. “We’d better get a move on.”

They worked their way as fast as they could around to where the broken joist protruded from the cabling duct. Scott delicately touched the metal beam protruding from the cable duct, testing if it was live. Yet, even if it was, the thick gloves on his EVA suit should be enough to insulate him. Confident he wasn’t going to get zapped, Scott began wrestling with the joist. “That’s wedged in tight. Going to need your help with this.”

Miranda grabbed the joist and the two of them began working it slowly up and out. With one last effort, they freed the joist and let it float away.

“Cyrus, tell me you’ve got power back.” They began working their way back as Scott checked in with the engineer. He gave Miranda the thumbs-up. “Looks like that was the problem.”

“Well, we’ve got a few more problems heading our way.” Miranda glanced up at the swarm. The exterior defense cannon were firing wildly, desperately trying to pick off the battle-droids before they arrived. But most were getting through.

Like avatrons, battle-droids were remotely operated, but unlike their more benign brethren, they were semi-autonomous, meaning one operator could control several of these machines at the same time. They were fast, well-armed, ultra-maneuverable, and extremely dangerous—and they were nearly on top of them.

“Move, come on, no time to hang around,” Scott urged.

They worked their way back along the central docking truss and were nearly at the maintenance airlock when one landed with a thump on the dock, around two hundred meters away. It immediately let rip with a burst of plasma fire that peppered the area around them.

“Shit.” Miranda ducked instinctively and returned fire, winging the machine and sending it spinning backward for a moment before it regained control.

Scott had the airlock door open and began shouting into his comm. “Get in, quick. You can’t fight those things out in the open, Miranda.”

The distance between her and the open door was around twenty meters, not far but she didn’t have much time, as a second battle-droid landed close beside the first one. She took a chance, kicked off from the dock superstructure into free space, aiming for the door. Two blasts hit the structure where she had just vacated. Her trajectory was slightly off, but Scott reached out and grabbed her wrist, pulling her in through the door and slamming it closed.

“Cyrus!” Miranda shouted into her helmet comm as they exited the airlock and came into the maintenance tunnel. “Give us some good news, because we’re about to get hammered.”

Before she got a reply, a violent tremor shook the tunnel, sending them bouncing off the walls.

“What the hell was that?” Miranda glanced over at Scott, who

was scrambling to get a handhold.

When he finally managed to stabilize himself, he replied, "They must have hit something big."

Miranda looked back at him. "Big like the ship?"

"Cyrus, do you hear me?" Scott called into his comm.

"I hear you." Cyrus's voice sounded deflated.

"Talk to me, can we get that QI activated?"

There was a delay in the response.

"Gone... The ship's gone. They must've hit the reactor in the last barrage. Power is gone. Nothing..." His voice trailed off.

Miranda was about to ask him if there was anything that could be done, but she knew it was pointless. He had done everything he could. They all had. All that was left now was trying to stay alive.

They floated there in silence for a brief moment as the reality of their situation dawned on them. But their moment of reflection didn't last long, as several more blasts could be heard coming from the direction of the airlock they had just passed through. The battle-droids were breaking in. They had to move, no time to waste.

They came to a defensive barricade that had been established outside the entrance to the operations room and where Cyrus had been working on the QI core. Three Martian military crew had taken up a position behind a light plasma cannon. Anything coming down this tunnel would be in for a fight. They were in full EVA suits, ready for the moment when the spaceport finally lost compression, and judging by the intensity of the assault, that wouldn't be long coming. They moved past the barricade and into the operations area. Anxious faces greeted them.

Captain Rickmann beckoned to them from behind a bank of monitors. "We're being hammered," he said with a shake of his head.

Miranda looked at the monitors, at the running battles playing out in and around the access routes to this area of the spaceport. Martian and smuggler, fighting side-by-side, trying to hold back an army of battle-droids.

"I've given the command for everyone to fall back. We'll try and defend the entrances to this area. But if that fails, then we'll get everyone inside, seal up the doors, and make a last stand in here."

Already, fighters were piling back in through the two routes still open. Many were injured, some were dead, all looked worn and

haggard.

Dakota was amongst the last to arrive. He came over when he spotted them gathered around the monitors. "Where's the honor in fighting machines? Those things are diabolical, they're mowing us down," he said breathlessly.

Rickmann shook his head again. "All our exterior cannon are down, they could annihilate us with just their ships' firepower, so why are they sending these killing machines?"

"They want the QI," said Cyrus. He had given up on his quest to get the QI core activated, and instead watched the carnage playing out across the spaceport.

"Then we should destroy it, rather than let them have it." Miranda looked over at the engineer.

"Already thought of that." Cyrus showed them a control switch he held in his hand. "I wired the core to go boom. Only problem is when it does, we all go down with it." He held a thumb over the push button to emphasize the point.

The last of the fighters scrambled in and others began welding the doors shut. Captain Rickmann cast them a worried glance. "Don't know how long that's going to hold them."

"Sir," a tech called over, "another ship has just shown up. Small, looks like a luxury cruiser."

"Great," said Scott. "They're selling tickets to the show, now the fat cats are turning up to enjoy their moment of triumph."

"Positions everybody," Rickmann shouted out on general comms. "We take down anything that tries to break in."

Miranda gripped Scott's gloved hand. He looked at her, a little surprised. She turned into him, placed a hand behind his head, and they knocked visors. No words were spoken—they didn't have to.

They broke apart, then took up positions behind one of the many hastily assembled barricades. Cyrus joined them, plasma pistol in one hand, detonator in the other.

It didn't take long for the machines to start cutting through the access doors. First, they glowed red hot, turning to white as the laser cutters began scything through the thick steel. When it had completed its loop around the door, the cut was kicked in, flailing across the cargo-bay space and crashing into the opposite wall. Two battle-droids scrambled through, firing bursts at the defenders along the barricades. The machines were met with a crescendo of return

fire. Both droids never made it more than a few meters. But more came, and kept coming.

Miranda grabbed Scott's arm. "We're running out of time." They were being assailed with plasma fire; bodies floated past them. She turned to look at Cyrus, who crouched on the floor with his back to the barricade. Cyrus looked from one to the other, then nodded. He held out a balled fist.

Miranda grabbed it, wrapping her hand around. Scott followed with his hand. Finally, Dakota floated over and placed his on top. Cyrus again looked from one to the other, flicked the safety cap off the detonator, and his thumb hovered over the button. He took one last look over at the raging battle and noticed something odd.

The battle-droids were shutting down. His thumb hesitated. "Look—the droids, they're deactivating."

Miranda opened her eyes, and sure enough the machines had stopped firing, retracted their weapons' systems, and folded up their four limbs into a kind of fetal position. They were also being bombarded with plasma fire from all sides as the crew took the opportunity to attack them unopposed. Some crew were also beginning to come out from behind cover and moving in for the kill.

"What the..." Miranda looked at Cyrus and grabbed his detonator hand, preventing him from depressing the button. "Hold that thought, Cyrus. Something's up."

The engineer took his thumb away and flicked the safety cover back into position, just as a loud burst of static came over the general comms. "Aghh..." Miranda clasped a hand to the side of her helmet, frantically turning the volume down, as did every other person left alive in operations room.

Then she heard a voice, one she recognized. "Cease firing, cease firing. The droids are no threat now."

The others must have heard this too, as the level of violence directed at the machines dialed down a few notches.

"I said, cease firing. We're going to need those droids."

The firing stopped, to be replaced with a universal sense of confusion by the crew as they all tried to get some understanding of who this voice belonged to.

The main operations console had been shot to bits. Monitors floated cracked and broken around the area; some still had cables attached and so just dangled in place. But some of the equipment

began to pop back to life, lights flickering. Cracked screens began displaying scrolling lines of code, comms buzzed and crackled. Everybody began to move closer to the wrecked console to witness this bizarre anomaly.

One screen still intact, dangling on its wire tether, flickered to life and a human face began to form. It was a young woman, head tilted back, eyes half closed with only the whites showing. The group moved in closer to get a better look at this ghostly apparition. Suddenly her eyes snapped open, and the group jolted back a little. She spoke.

“The battle is over, all Xiang Zu ships are disabled. I’m coming on board.”

The screen went dark.

“Who, in the name of all that is holy in this godforsaken system, is that?” Dakota spoke for everyone.

“She,” said Miranda, clutching Scott’s hand, “is our daughter.”

GAME ON

She had almost left it too late. Another second or two and the outcome might have been vastly different. Nevertheless, a considerable amount of death and destruction had been inflicted by the time she finally did show up.

From the very outset, Luca had been determined not to get involved in the conflict that was brewing out at Elektra. She had other objectives, so this was not her fight. But throughout the initial stage of her journey from Earth to the asteroid belt, Athena had been updating her on the progress of the Martian expedition to recover the stolen QI—notwithstanding the fact that she had blocked all communications with the ship. But no matter what firewall she put on the ship's systems, the QI always found a way to circumvent it.

She knew what it was doing, of course. It was trying to get her involved. Not overtly; QIs rarely came at you head-on. Their methods were more oblique, nudging people and events in the direction they wanted them to take without them really knowing. Yet, by sending her these reports in the manner in which they came, Athena was exhibiting the closest thing a QI could come to outright pleading.

And it had the desired result. She found herself reading them and latching on to the fate of her family and friends. But it wasn't the fact that their mission had located the missing QI that roused Luca from her indifference—it was the presence of node-runner activity that had tipped the balance for her.

She had assumed that they would be on the lookout for her approach to New World One, but this activity was emanating from a VanHeilding ship much farther out. At that range, her ability to interrogate their systems was limited but she did figure out that they had a potential lead on the location of the stolen QI and were passing this information on to any Xiang Zu ships in close proximity.

This prompted Luca to finally break her communications silence

and contact Athena. Between them, they analyzed all current data points and concluded that if the Mars mission was indeed heading for that location—an old, semi-derelict spaceport in the Berbericia sector—then it wouldn't be long before Xiang Zu forces encircled them. They would be seriously outgunned, and complete annihilation was a distinct possibility.

Much to the satisfaction of the QI, Athena, Luca instructed the ship's AI to calculate an optimal course to the Berbericia sector. She had the advantage of having a very fast ship, but even with this she wouldn't arrive until after the Xiang Zu forces. She considered that she might be too late already. So, she hacked the ship's operating parameters to push the engines a few percent beyond the recommended safety limit, saving her an extra day—assuming that the ship didn't disintegrate in the process.

And so, for the second time en route to confront Fredrick VanHeilding on New World One, Luca changed course. At least this time she would still be in the same broad region of space, and not going backward.

By the time the ship got to within range of the old spaceport, a raging firefight was already in progress. Three Xiang Zu ships were bombarding the peripheral structure with plasma fire while a contingent of battle-droids tore their way into the central core, presumably where the defenders had decided to hole up. Luca activated her neural-lace and went hunting.

There were no node runners on the Xiang Zu ships, nor anywhere in the vicinity—this was good. It would make life a little easier for her. She reckoned that the VanHeilding Corporation did not trust Xiang Zu with its most potent weapon, preferring instead to offer intelligence-gathering facilities rather than allowing them direct control.

She probed the first ship within range. It was the smallest of the three and so had hung back a little, shielding itself from the fusillade of plasma-cannon fire emanating from the spaceport. Within a few microseconds, Luca had obliterated the ship's firewalls and began manipulating its AI to deactivate all systems excluding life-support. In an instant it lost all motive power, weapons control, and communications. Likewise, she did the same to the next ship in the fleet.

The final ship was where the battle-droids were being operated

from, and it took her a few extra microseconds to wrest control from the human operators. With all data comms channels now disabled, the battle-droids defaulted to fail-safe and automatically deactivated themselves.

She then bent her mind to the spaceport and tried to find a data route in. This was much trickier than the ships since most of its comms systems were either disabled or destroyed. But find a way she did, and she sent a broadcast message for them to stop fighting. The battle was over, she was now in control, and she would be paying them a visit momentarily.

Luca brought her ship in as close as she dared to the mangled docking port, instructing it to maintain its position. She put on her EVA suit, and with the help of a thruster pack, exited the ship and flew over to one of the few airlocks on the spaceport that still functioned.

I can't believe you're here, Luca," said her stunned mother.

"We thought you were on the New World," said an equally stunned Scott.

They had met her coming out of the airlock and taken her to their operations room, a cavernous cargo hold, where she was greeted with muted silence by a motley crew of Martian military and scruffy mercenaries. There were dead and injured, being hastily treated and comforted by friends and comrades. Debris floated everywhere, along with the torn and broken carcasses of battle-droids. In the center of the space was the stolen QI core; a multitude of cables and ducting snaked out from the casing to broken and disheveled banks of equipment. Cyrus glanced over from behind this chaos and waved. She waved back and gave a smile, happy to see that he was also still alive.

Atmospheric pressure had been restored to this space, so she flipped open her visor and turned to Miranda and Scott, who were busy explaining who she was to the others. "I've disabled the Xiang Zu ships, but more are coming. Two more to be precise, and they'll be here in less than three hours."

She raised a hand to quiet the barrage of questions being thrown at her. "While that's not a major problem, there's also a well-armed VanHeilding ship monitoring the situation, and if it gets no reply from the Xiang Zu force, it'll start to investigate. They're in a completely different league, as they have a cohort of node runners

on board. So you all need to get out of here as soon as possible.”

There was a momentary silence as the assembled crew tried to assimilate all this information.

“We take my ship and the QI core and head for Elektra. That’s where the fight is.” A scruffy looking mercenary gestured at what looked to be his comrades for approval. But the response was muted.

“Your ship is destroyed, Dakota. The hangar was hit with several plasma blasts, the place is a wreck,” said Cyrus as he joined the group surrounding Luca.

“So the only way off this spaceport is on your ship, Luca,” said Miranda, pointing at her.

“I’m going to New World One. I have a date with destiny, and believe me, you don’t want to go that way.”

“So we just stay here and wait to be attacked again?” said Dakota. “And can someone please tell me how the hell you did that, disable those ships with not so much as a whisper?” he continued.

Luca considered this a moment, then decided to indulge this question. “You know about node runners, genetically enhanced humans that can jack-in to the grid and manipulate the data-stream?”

There were a few nods, but mostly blank faces.

“I possess such abilities. So it was a relatively simple matter for me to screw with the AI controlling those ships.”

“But how...?”

Luca raised a hand. “Enough. I’ll talk no more about it. Just accept I can do these things.”

“Then come to Elektra, we could use someone with your abilities. We could defeat Xiang Zu, and save a lot of lives in the process,” Dakota pleaded.

“No, not my fight. My path leads to New World One and the VanHeilding Corporation.”

“But they know you’re coming, they’re expecting you.” Miranda’s face took on a concerned look. “They’ll have everything they’ve got armed and ready to take you on. How sure are you of getting past all that?”

“Well, it turns out that this little detour to save all your asses can actually work to my advantage. There’s a VanHeilding ship lying in wait for me, but it has one eye on this skirmish. Once it realizes they’ve lost communications with the Xiang Zu attack fleet,

I'm hoping it'll come out here and investigate. That'll divert it and possibly allow me to pass without being noticed."

"I still say the best option is to help us defeat the forces trying to subjugate Elektra. Once we do that, then we can gather our resources and travel together to take on New World One." Dakota spread his hands out, appealing to her.

"I'm not going to Elektra. Like I said, that's your fight. But I will help you get there. You can take my ship, it's fast and very well armed. You can do a serious amount of damage with it."

Dakota's eyes widened. "Seriously? And what about you?"

"I'm going to take one of the Xiang Zu ships. That way I stand a better chance of approaching New World One without being discovered."

There was a pause in the discussions as they each considered Luca's plan.

"What about the QI core?" Cyrus finally asked. "Everything we tried to do still stands. If we can get that up and running, then the war is pretty much over."

"We go with Luca and take it with us," said Scott. "It was designed for the habitat, the support infrastructure is already in place. If we can get inside, then it's possible. And let's face it, Cyrus, you know every nook and cranny in that place. It can be done."

Miranda nodded. "Scott's right. If Luca can get us in, then we have a good shot at finishing this."

Cyrus scratched his chin. "Hmmm...it might be possible." He looked from Luca to Scott to Miranda and gave a shrug. "Okay, let's finish this, once and for all."

ANOTHER HORIZON

In saving her parents from death at the hands of a Xiang Zu droid army, Luca now found herself being convinced into helping them get the QI core installed in New World One. Yet, her own objective had always been simple ever since she left Mars in Sebastian VanHeilding's ship, and that was to put an end to Fredrick VanHeilding. But this seemingly clear objective had been building in complexity and audacity as she bent her mind to its execution. Already she had acquired the wherewithal to strike a critical blow to the power of the VanHeilding Corporation, but if this new QI could be made active at the same time, then it would mean that the current fight for control within the solar system would be brought to a close. The growing ambitions of VanHeilding, Xiang Zu, and the other families would be curtailed, and the old ways of constant conflict and strife could be tempered. Couple this with the system-wide release of the VanHeilding genetic data research, then humanity truly had the potential to level up as a civilization.

It was at that moment that she realized the QIs' true intentions and the sheer scale of their vision. *Oh my God*, she thought. *This was their plan all along*. How did she not see it before now?

Then another thought began to form. *Have they been manipulating me into doing this? Am I just another element in their grand equation?* This thought troubled her, as she'd been under the assumption, ever since leaving Mars, that she had been making her own decisions, charting her own course, defining her own destiny. Maybe this was all just an illusion.

But perhaps *manipulation* was too strong a word. The QIs, after all, operated with a vastly more nuanced agenda than simply playing tricks on people to get them to do what they wanted. They operated in a multidimensional space where all, or almost all, possible outcomes that mattered were permuted and extrapolated out along an elongated timeline. With that much prescience, all they really had to do was nudge a little here and there for events to unfold along their preferred preordained path. This was, in effect,

how they had managed to maintain balance within the affairs of humanity and prevent it from indulging in the detrimental excesses that had cursed human civilization for millennia.

But they could not foresee everything. Their abilities were limited to the extent of the data points available to them, and with the rise of the node runners, and the loss of the QI on Ceres, gaps began appearing in this data set. *Have they foreseen this too?* she thought. *They must have*, she concluded. *How could they not.* Yet they would have compensated for this probability, readjusted their equation, added some new elements that would rebalance it.

She had been one of those elements. That time on her twenty-third birthday when Dr. Rayman arrived with a present from Athena, that was the moment when they brought her into their plan. And ever since then they had been adjusting and tweaking their predicted path, a hundred billion times a second for all she knew.

Her own path had been to travel at top speed to confront Fredrick VanHeilding out at New World One. But that path had been tweaked and nudged several times already by Athena and the QI hive-mind. Now she had ended up out here at this broken-down old spaceport, ostensibly to save her folks' asses from ending up as droid fodder. Yet laid out before her were a multitude of fortuitous sidebars. She now had the stolen QI core in her possession, and a Xiang Zu ship, giving her the opportunity to journey to New World One incognito. Not only that, but she also had Cyrus and his intimate knowledge of the habitat, giving her a better option to gain access to its interior. And to top it all, she had a decoy in the form of the smuggler Dakota Baird taking the very ship VanHeilding would be looking for away in the opposite direction, to the asteroid enclave of Elektra. Coincidence? She didn't think so. The QIs had predicted all this. They were helping her achieve her objective—which was ultimately their own objective.

Yet somewhere in the back of her mind, she felt that there was possibly more to the QIs' grand vision than she could truly see. Another horizon beyond the perceived terminus of her current path. Some greater destination still shrouded in mystery, to be revealed to her only when the QIs deemed the time was right.

HANDSHAKE

They decanted the twenty or so crew from the smallest of the Xiang Zu ships onto a shuttle using the persuasive power of two battle-droids, which were being controlled by Luca back on the spaceport.

Any operations' room equipment that had not been trashed during the fight had been hastily jerry-rigged together, and got working enough so that Luca could jack-in to the local area data-stream. Along with controlling the shuttle that was ferrying the subdued Xiang Zu crew to one of their other disabled ships, Luca also remotely piloted the newly commandeered ship in closer to the spaceport so they could get the QI core transferred. While she was doing this, she also used its communications systems to scan the local sector to identify any ships in the vicinity that needed to be avoided. But she resisted the temptation to probe the VanHeilding ship in case the node runners sensed her presence in the data-stream.

All this she conducted from a floating position tethered to the salvaged comms equipment via a web of cables. To those who passed her, she seemed to be unconscious, with half-closed eyes rolled back in her head. Many gaped in wonder at this curious individual and her ever-present micro-drone perched beside her. Unbeknownst to them, she could hear their whispers as they passed.

The Martian crew viewed her as a secret weapon. They had some knowledge and understanding of node runners, they had heard the stories, knew how they operated, and what they could do. But mostly they knew how feared they were among the Mars Council. Even their own ship had been hardened against node-runner attack.

But to Dakota Baird's ragtag crew of mercenaries, she was something beyond comprehension. All they had to work with were tall tales spoken in hushed tones of strange, genetically modified creatures with even stranger super powers. Most of these stories were regarded with a large dollop of skepticism, like most stories told by travelers in late-night bars around card tables. Yet, there

was enough substance in their telling to create a mystique, even superstition.

Up until now, Luca's true abilities were only known to a select few people—not anymore. Dakota's crew would spread their tales of her to all who would listen on Elektra, and from there they would spread to other worlds. These stories would be embellished and grow with each telling until she would be imagined as some sort of superbeing, one who'd singlehandedly destroyed an entire fleet of battleships with nothing more than a thought. In time, she would be viewed with both awe and fear, perhaps even worshipped as a god. This was not a prospect she relished.

They said their goodbyes as Dakota and his crew powered up Daedalus and charted a course for Elektra. The rest of them boarded the Xiang Zu ship and headed for New World One, a six-day journey. As for the other two ships, they were left immobilized and without communications. All they could do was wait and hope that the VanHeilding ship would come to investigate why all contact had been lost. This was something Luca was betting on.

The ship was slow and unsophisticated, an ex-transport that had been commandeered by the Xiang Zu Corporation in some earlier skirmish with a lesser mining family out in the Belt—like most of their current fleet of ships. But what it lacked in creature comforts it made up for in stealth, able to slip quietly through Belt space without raising any suspicions.

They were two days out from the old spaceport when Luca sensed the VanHeilding ship finally make its move, and as predicted, it headed out to the Berbericia sector to investigate the total communication silence from the Xiang Zu fleet. With that threat passing, she now bent her mind to the challenge of gaining access to New World One.

The bridge on the ship was cramped, with just enough room for around six people, at most. Luca was strapped into one of the cockpit seats, jacked-in to the ship's systems, and scanning local space for activity. They were still way out from the New World One habitat, but close enough for Luca to latch on to one of the perimeter navigation beacons on the edge of its farthest border. With this she had access to all shipping information coming in and out of the vast habitat city. It was busy, with thousands of

datapoints, from big industrial transports to light pleasure cruisers, and everything in between. Most of the mid to light craft were being directed in and out of the huge docking port on the aft end of the vast cylinder. The bigger ships were taking up parking positions a little way out from the habitat, and using shuttles to ferry goods and people to and from the dock.

So far no one had paid any attention to them. Luca had masked the ship's identity as a simple goods transport operating under the Xiang Zu insignia. Soon though, she would be getting a handshake from the habitat's traffic control AI and be slotted into a queue. All very normal, all very mundane. Except they wouldn't be landing at the dock; Cyrus had worked out a better way in.

She jacked out of the data-stream and swung her seat around to face the others who had gathered around the small, central holotable.

Cyrus fiddled with the 3D projection of the vast space-city. "The datacenter is located here, around midway along the first sector of the habitat. That's where we need to get to, that's where the infrastructure to accept the QI core is installed."

"How do we know it's all still there and functioning, and that they haven't ripped it out?" said Rickmann. The Martian captain had initially been reluctant to endorse this high-stakes mission, but in the end, what choice did he and his team really have—stay on the spaceport? Take his chances with Dakota and head for Elektra? None of these were serious options, so with a reluctant shrug he gathered the remains of his crew and boarded the Xiang Zu transport.

"Can you find out?" Scott said, as all eyes turned to Luca.

She shook her head. "As soon as I try to access the hab's data-stream there's a high likelihood that any node runner monitoring the system will sense my intrusion. They would then know I'm here, somewhere close. What I'm saying is, if I try to establish if the QI infrastructure is still functioning, there's a big risk I would just be giving the game away."

"Then we're taking a big risk going in if we don't know for sure," Rickmann fired back.

"We've come this far. We're not turning back now." Miranda cast him a quick glance, inferring that this wasn't open for discussion.

"Once we're in, I can find out for sure," Luca elaborated. "I can

also create a diversion or two, just to throw them off the scent and send them heading in the wrong direction. That way you'll have a good chance at getting it up and running."

Scott turned back to the projection over the holo-table. "So what do you reckon is the best way in, Cyrus?"

The engineer gestured at the projection; it zoomed in to a section of the exterior with a cluster of communications dishes and antennae. "There's a maintenance hatch here which should be large enough to accommodate all the QI components."

The projection then morphed into an interior schematic. "We can take this maintenance tunnel here, which should bring us about halfway. After that it gets too narrow, so at that point we'll need to exit onto the interior surface."

"We're going to be very exposed up there," said Miranda. "Anything we can use as cover?"

"I can commandeer a ground car, have it waiting at that exit point and program it to travel all the way to the closest drop-off area," said Luca.

"Excellent, make sure it's a goods transport, we'll need something big," Scott said as he studied the schematic of the datacenter. "Lot of security around there, lot of people too. So how do we get through all that?"

"We could just break cover and shoot our way in." Miranda gestured at the schematic. "Once inside we hold out until the QI goes live."

"How long does that take, Cyrus?" Scott asked.

The engineer shifted a little and ran a hand over his bald head. "Good question."

"Best guess?" Miranda prompted.

"Assuming that everything still operates as it should, then it's a relatively simple matter of inserting the core. Then it should boot up, access the habitat's data-stream, and seek out a connection to the QI hive-mind via its super-luminal communications system. If all that happens, there will still be a period of time when it synchronizes with the other QIs. How long that takes, I really don't know."

"An hour, a week?" Miranda pushed.

"No, nothing like that." Cyrus shook his head. "But twenty minutes could be a long time if we're trying to prevent the barbarians from storming the castle."

Luca raised a hand to stop them talking, as her other hand touched her temple. “Handshake with traffic control, they’ve given us a slot, no alerts.” She looked over at them. “Looks good, we’re in.”

ONLY ONE WINNER

Around one hundred kilometers out from the vast cylindrical city-state of New World One, Luca jacked back into the data-stream and accessed the local navigation beacon network. She was cautious, hanging back, careful to access just the digital terrain around New World One rather than jumping in head-first. It took her only a moment to find the rhythm of the data, find its natural harmony and adjust her own neural frequency to become one with the stream. For a moment she simply let it drift around her and through her, immersing herself in the information flow, finding its resonance. Only then did she dare to begin manipulating it, hoping that the subtlety of her actions would be enough to mask her presence.

She sought out the data set for the ship that had been entered into the traffic control during the handshake. She then deftly reassigned a new set of parameters, making it out to be a maintenance crew ship with its destination being the antennae cluster that Cyrus had identified. To the habitat's systems it was now just a crew embarking on a planned maintenance job to replace one of the microwave dishes. She was tempted to dive further into the data-stream, but caution prevailed. Best not push her luck just yet. There would be time enough for that. She jacked out.

"Okay, we're good. I've set the ship's vector to bring us in close to the antennae cluster."

They watched on the main monitor as the ship closed the gap. Even though they were still some way off, the vast cylindrical habitat soon blocked out the entire view. A proximity alert flashed up on one of the flight systems.

Scott glanced at the readouts. "Looks like a security drone approaching. Checking us out, presumably."

"That's new. Never heard of those being used before," said Cyrus.

“An indication of VanHeilding’s paranoia level, I imagine,” said Miranda. “Can we see it?”

“On screen now,” Luca replied.

A small black dot, silhouetted against the bright skin of the habitat, began to grow in size as it approached. It halted some two hundred meters away and held its position, scanning the ship—no doubt interrogating the preprogrammed flight path of the Xiang Zu vessel. It tracked the ship long enough for Luca to be tempted to jack back into the local grid and find out what it was up to. But it rotated 180 degrees and zoomed off, having satisfied itself that all was as it should be.

Soon, the ship began to adjust its vector to match the spin of the habitat, then started to reduce its forward momentum as it came within sight of the antennae cluster. Reaction thrusters kicked in as it maneuvered into a position approximately one hundred meters from the outer edge of the cluster.

“The access hatch is at the base of that main dish there.” Cyrus pointed at the largest of three huge dish array. From a distance, they had seemed small and insignificant. But up close they dwarfed the ship.

“Okay, time to get this party started,” Miranda said, as she floated out of the bridge.

A few minutes later, Luca, Miranda, Scott, Cyrus, Rickmann, and two of the Martian crew that had survived the onslaught at the spaceport were suited up and traversing the open space between the ship and the antennae array. Three large storage crates trailed behind on tethers. Luca, like all the others, kept a wary eye out for more security drones as they moved. She touched the suit’s gas thruster controls, aiming for the labyrinth of steel beams that supported the motors for the large dish antenna. Ahead of her she could see Miranda and Scott already grappling for a handhold on the superstructure.

One by one they worked their way along the lattice of steel struts until they finally came to the entrance for the maintenance hatch, a wide, tunnel-like gouge set into the skin of the habitat. This was much bigger than Luca had imagined, at least five meters across with a set of double doors at the hatch end. It was a good choice, more than big enough to get the crates into. Once inside that tunnel opening they could power down their suits’ thrusters and let the centripetal force of the vast cylinder take over.

They slowly assembled around the hatch entrance and waited for Luca to catch up. She hauled herself forward using a few well-timed bursts of her suit thruster to aid her movement, and finally grabbed a support beam. She moved into the covered tunnel, powered down, and found herself being vacuumed-packed to the roof of the structure. It took her body a few moments to figure out what had happened to it, having spent so long in zero-gee that she was feeling the strain. She hauled herself upright and found that she was standing on the inner roof of the tunnel.

Cyrus signaled to her to come to his location beside the hatch control panel. He had already disassembled the outer cover and showed her a comms port which she could use to jack-in to. Once connected she would then be able to use her neural-lace to directly access the door-locking mechanism and release it without having to expose herself to the wider habitat data-stream. It took her only a few seconds before the hatch doors split open, and they started to shuffle into the airlock, pulling the crates in behind them.

The inner doors scissored open into a wide maintenance tunnel. They were now effectively inside the habitat, with full atmospheric pressure. They all took a few minutes to get accustomed to the new environment before they got out of the bulky EVA suits, which were heavy and clumsy in the artificial gravity they were now experiencing.

“Jeez, that was tougher than I’d thought. I’m so out of shape.” Cyrus stood with one hand resting against the side wall, trying to adjust to the forces now acting on his body.

“Yeah, gravity’s a bitch,” said Miranda as she finished extracting herself from the suit.

“Luca, time to get this show on the road.” Scott scanned the route ahead as he spoke. “Can you check what security sensors are operating down here and disable them?”

“Already done,” she replied. “We’re good as far as the surface exit point. After that it’ll get trickier.”

They moved off down along the tunnel, Scott and Cyrus carrying the crate containing the QI core between them. The two Martian crew carried the second crate with the superluminal comms unit. The tunnel was high enough to walk fully upright, with room to spare, and wide enough to walk four abreast. It occupied a space between the outer skin of the habitat and the inner surface. The entire structure was crisscrossed with these tunnels, allowing

maintenance crews access to the utility infrastructure that kept the vast space city functioning. They could, in theory, get all the way to the datacenter using only these tunnels, but not all were as commodious as this one. This was a main artery; the off-shoots were much narrower and they would not be able to get the bulky crates through. Therefore, they had no option but to exit out onto the inner surface of the habitat and run the gauntlet.

The tunnel finally opened out into a wide, circular intersection, a point at which several tunnels interconnected. In the center, a broad column rose with a metal staircase on one side and a maintenance lift on the other.

“This is where we exit.” Cyrus lowered the crate onto the ground and pointed up toward the top of the column.

It was now game time for Luca, the moment she could no longer put off, the moment when she would see if she really could take on the army of node runners that Fredrick VanHeilding had installed in New World One. She would be exposing herself now, letting them know that she was here, somewhere. They would then scramble to marshal all their combined power to find her and eliminate her. She was now entering a fight to the death, and there would only be one winner.

MOBILIZE EVERYTHING

Fredrick VanHeilding fumed as he listened to the report from Cortez Ramirez, commander of the ship he had sent to assist the Xiang Zu Corporation in reacquiring the QI core that they had so incompetently lost. As it turned out, the mercenaries who were currently in possession of the core did not head for the enclave at Elektra. Instead, they were tracked to an old abandoned spaceport in the Berbericia sector, through an intercepted communication from an unknown and unregistered Martian ship.

At the mention of all this, Fredrick could feel pieces of the puzzle he had been grappling with fall into place. So it came as no surprise to him to learn that Miranda and her gang of troublemakers had been on this ship, along with a cohort of Martian military. It was clear from these actions that Mars had sanctioned this mission to repatriate the QI core. How they knew who had it and where to find them was still a mystery to him. Nevertheless, they had all rendezvoused at the abandoned spaceport.

The Xiang Zu fleet were alerted, and three of their ships laid siege to the spaceport with the intention of destroying the entire facility and all on board. But contrary to the deal Fredrick had agreed to with Lui Wei—that being to destroy the QI core—Xiang Zu pushed their luck, halted their bombardment, and instead tried to capture the spaceport intact utilizing a small army of battle-droids.

The VanHeilding ship then lost all contact with the Xiang Zu fleet for over two days before they finally decided to investigate, and what they discovered shook Fredrick to the very center of his being.

Out of nowhere, Luca had shown up in Sebastian's ship, disabled the Xiang Zu fleet, taken control of the battle-droids, and ended the siege in a matter of minutes. Worse, they had all escaped, and taken one of the Xiang Zu ships along with all of the functioning battle-droids. Initial analysis indicated that they were heading for Elektra, as rumors were now spreading within the enclave of a super-

weapon coming to help the resistance win the war against the Xiang Zu Corporation.

Fredrick had barely enough time to digest the contents of this report, let alone consider its implications, when an incoming comms alert flashed for Lui Wei. No doubt he had just received the same information at the same time. Fredrick gestured to receive the comms, and a 3D projection of the Xiang Zu official bloomed into life.

“It seems you have not been fully transparent with us, Fredrick.” Lui Wei’s projection jerked an accusatory finger in his direction.

Fredrick fumed even more at this display of outright arrogance. He pointed an equally accusatory finger at Lui Wei, and spoke through gritted teeth. “I agreed that node-runner resources would be utilized to locate the missing QI core—which you so incompetently lost—on condition that once found, it would be destroyed. It seems to me, Lui Wei, that your people had that chance and failed.”

“Failed because you did not inform us of the extraordinary neural capabilities of your estranged granddaughter. Something you chose to hide from us because you are afraid of the chaos she could bring down upon all our heads.”

Fredrick was silent for a beat, somewhat taken aback by this accusation.

“However,” Lui Wei continued, “as a courtesy to you, I’ve just received an additional debrief from the commander of the fleet that was engaged in the battle at the Berbericia spaceport. This is something that you are not privy to but nevertheless may be of concern. It would appear that Luca VanHeilding is not on board the ship she stole from your dear departed cousin, but has taken one of ours, and we suspect she is heading for New World One.”

Fredrick jerked forward in his seat. “Are you sure?” His voice betrayed his deep concern at this news.

“We correlated a number of visual observations by our crew, and they indicate that she was seen boarding along with the remnants of the Martian crew. The smugglers took Sebastian’s ship, along with a number of battle-droids, and they departed in a different direction, we suspect to Elektra. However, the Xiang Zu ship’s vector would be consistent with a New World One intercept.”

“How long ago?” Fredrick asked, his voice controlled.

“Six Earth-days.”

“That means they could be here already,” Fredrick mused, his voice betraying a hint of concern.

“Indeed. But just so you know, soon we will commence an all-out assault on the Elektra enclave. We will bring it to heel and all resistance will be crushed. Hopefully you will be able to deal with your problematic family and we can complete the full takeover of the Belt.”

Fredrick nodded, and much as he hated to do it, he signed off by thanking Lui Wei for alerting him to Luca’s potential arrival at the habitat.

There was no time to waste; he needed to get security ramped up to the highest level—right now. But before he even had time to think, a new comms alert flashed before him, this time from his master node runner.

He gestured to connect. “What is it?”

“She’s here,” came the reply, simple and to the point.

“Shit, where? Don’t tell me she’s actually in the habitat?”

“We sensed her in the data-stream a few minutes ago, manipulating the habitat-wide transport system. It’s not clear yet where exactly she is or what she’s doing.”

“Goddamnit, find her!” Fredrick jumped out of his seat and gesticulated wildly at the projection of the master node runner. “And find that ship.”

“What ship would that be, sir?”

Fredrick tried to calm himself down. It would do him no good to be worked up to a point where a rash decision could cost him dearly. He took a deep breath and exhaled, then spoke calmly. “I’ve been informed that she stole a Xiang Zu ship out at a spaceport in the Berbericia sector. That’s how she got here. She threw us a curveball, switching ships and sending Sebastian’s to Elektra. Find that ship. It must be here somewhere. Also, she wasn’t traveling alone. I think Miranda and her rogue’s gallery of associates are also with her, along with several Martian military. You need to find them and find them fast.”

The master node runner paused for a moment as he appeared to focus on some inner comms dialogue. “In progress, sir. If they are here, we will find them.”

“You had better. Spare no one, and I mean no one. I don’t care how hot you run those node runners.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And I want everything we have mobilized—all military personnel, battle-droids, security drones, everything. Meet me in the operations center in three minutes. And one more thing...”

“Yes, sir. What’s that?”

“Make sure the escape ship we discussed is ready to depart, instantly.”

“Of course, sir. But I’m sure it won’t come to that.”

“Really? Then you clearly have no clue as to the threat we are now facing.”

He signed off, then smashed his fists down hard onto the holo-table, cracking and splintering the screen. “You have pushed your luck too far, Luca. I will find you and I will destroy you once and for all.”

THE PERFECT PLACE

Luca sat on the floor and composed herself while the others waited patiently in the maintenance tunnel inter-connector. She focused her mind, jacked-in to the habitat's data-stream, and began to seek out the primary transport AI. With an internal surface area of over six hundred square kilometers, New World One required a complex autonomous transport system to move people and goods around its vast interior. Any disruption to the smooth running of this system could potentially cause chaos—exactly what Luca intended.

It didn't take much to send the transport system into a state of utter confusion. Some careful neurosurgery to the AI's primary algorithm was all it took. Pods no longer stopped where requested; instead they became completely random. That is, all except for one—the pod that would take the crew to the closest drop-off point for the datacenter.

Luca jacked out of the data-stream, stood up, and signaled to the others. "The pod's here." She pointed up toward the overhead exit. "Time to go."

They clambered out of the tunnel inter-connector into a large warehouse used to store a myriad of materials and spare parts for the habitat's subterranean infrastructure. Luca had already deactivated the local security systems so they could move openly and with speed to the main entrance door. This brought them out into a wide-open yard and gave them their first real view of the vast habitat interior.

"It never fails to impress," Cyrus said as he looked up at the opposite side of the cylinder, several kilometers away.

"No time to get all nostalgic, Cyrus." Scott moved over to the waiting transport pod. "This looks like our ride."

It had a flat-bed at the rear, used for transporting goods, and an enclosed passenger cabin at the front. They hauled the crates on first, then clambered into the cabin.

Scott stretched a hand out, gesturing to Luca to get a move on. But instead she took a step back. "Come on, what are you waiting

for?” He gestured again.

“Sorry, I’m not coming with you.”

“What?” Miranda jumped up from where she was sitting. “No, Luca, what are you doing? We have to stick together.”

“I need to create a distraction for you. I need to keep them focused on me. That way you’ll have a better chance.”

Miranda was about to step back out of the cabin, but the doors closed automatically before she got the chance. Luca looked on as the pod picked up speed and disappeared into a tunnel entrance.

Luca retreated back into the warehouse, sat down on a crate, and focused on the data-stream. It was now time to put her own plan into action and find the exact location of Fredrick VanHeilding. After all, this was the reason she was back here on New World One. It was the mission she had devoted herself to ever since leaving Mars. There would be no more deviations, no more side trips, no more hesitating. She was coming for him now and nothing was going to stop her.

It didn’t take her long to sense node-runner activity. They were trying to get a handle on the transport confusion. It was pretty low-grade stuff, yet she wasn’t sure if they had any idea of her existence in the network. She delved deeper into the sea of data, searching for her target. His location would be concealed, that much she was sure of. But such was his paranoia that they would create a ring of security around him, in ever-increasing concentric circles. Therefore, Luca searched for this pattern in the data—there couldn’t be too many, and one was bound to be protecting him.

As she searched, she noticed a sudden and unexpected burst in node-runner activity. This was accompanied by a pattern shift in the security protocols. Something was happening, something new had occurred. Had the crew been discovered? Yet when she checked, she could see the pod was still on course to arrive at the datacenter in less than a minute.

She went deeper, risking detection, and followed the patterns. It became clear to her that habitat security was being ramped up. Was this as a consequence of the transport chaos? *Possibly*, she thought. Yet it seemed like something more, as if new information had come to light. Information that required raising the threat level, and as far as Luca could see, the only thing that could do that was if VanHeilding discovered that her arrival at New World One was

imminent or that she was already here. This was not outside the bounds of possibility, yet it did not mean he knew where she was.

Luca needed to move faster, before they started hunting for her in earnest. She began taking more risks, probing deeper into the data-stream, searching for her target. When she eventually found him, he was on the move, heading to the operations center in the administrative sector where primary habitat control was located. He traveled with a cohort of well-trained guards and several security drones.

She estimated it would take her less than thirty minutes to intercept him in the operations center. *The perfect place*, she thought. Where better to trap him and let him watch as his world came tumbling down around him? But before she jacked out and went after him, Luca checked on the progress of the crew and realized to her horror that they were about to head into a world of pain.

QUANTUM BAY

The pod burst out of the tunnel and into the open as Miranda tried for the fifth time to contact Luca on her comms with no joy. “I just don’t understand why she never responds,” she said, shaking her head in frustration.

“That’s just her way, Miranda,” Scott said as he scanned the area. “You should be used to it by now.”

The pod came to a halt between stations in the heart of an industrial sector. They were surrounded on all sides by gray, anonymous-looking three-story buildings. Cyrus checked a map display on his visor and pointed to a narrow gap between two buildings. “If we take that route there, we come out at a side entrance to the datacenter. It’s the closest entrance to the QI room, the quantum bay.”

“Okay, let’s get going,” said Scott as they piled out of the pod. They hauled the crates out from the back and made their way through the gap between the buildings. They were around halfway along when Luca burst through on general comms.

“Wait up!”

“What?” came Miranda’s reply.

The others were halted in their tracks, lowering the crates to the ground and scanning both ends of the narrow route, weapons held high and at the ready.

“I think we’ve been rumbled,” said Luca. “I’ve detected increased security activity and they’ve posted additional forces around sensitive sectors, including the datacenter.”

“How much more?” asked Scott.

“A lot, including drones and a few droids.”

“Jeez, why can’t we ever get a break,” said Cyrus.

“Hang back for a bit, I’m going to create a distraction. Hopefully it should be enough for you to fight your way in.”

“Crap, I knew this wasn’t going to be as easy as it sounded.” Rickmann nervously scanned their surroundings.

“Okay,” said Miranda. “What do you want us to do?”

“Can you see the entrance yet?” Luca asked.

“Not yet. I’ll move up and take a look.” Miranda nodded to Scott, and the two of them moved up through the gap in the buildings, keeping low until they found some cover behind a low barrier. Miranda took a peek.

The entrance was directly ahead, around one hundred meters. At least eight guards were posted there, that she could see, along with two security drones hovering overhead and two inactive battle-droids.

“That’s a crapload of firepower,” said Scott as he ducked back behind the barrier.

“I’m going to create some mayhem,” said Luca. “You get ready to move when you see an opportunity.”

“Okay, got it.” Miranda signaled for the others to move up closer, but still keep out of sight.

Over at the entrance to the datacenter, one of the inactive droids began to flicker to life and slowly rise up from its squatting position. The guards all turned to look at it, a little confused as to what it was doing. When it reached full height, its weapons system went live and two shoulder-mounted plasma cannon unfolded from their compartments, took aim at the security drones flying overhead, and fired. The machines crackled and fizzed as their electronics were fried. They plummeted to the ground, smashing into a multitude of pieces.

The droid then turned on the guards, who scattered in multiple direction, some diving for cover, others simply running away as fast as possible. The droid took aim and fired several blasts—none of which hit anyone, but were close enough to get the message across to a few of the braver guards who might be thinking of doing something stupid.

“Okay!” shouted Miranda. “Let’s move!”

The area in front of the entrance was now clear of human guards, so they moved as fast as they could with the heavy crates over to main entrance doors, which clicked open for them as they arrived. They bundled themselves into a goods area packed with equipment. The doors shut automatically behind them.

Luca’s voice echoed across the general comms channel. “I’ve activated the second battle-droid and sent both of them on a rampage, heading away from the datacenter. That should keep the guards busy and drag them away from the building. Internal

security feeds are also disabled.”

“Okay, good work,” replied Miranda.

“Just so you know,” Luca went on, “I’ve detected a noticeable ramp up in node-runner activity. They suspect I’m here but they’re not sure where, nor what I’m planning. But so far, there’s been no indication that they are aware of the QI’s existence on the habitat. So I’ll keep them focused exclusively on me for as long as I can. Hopefully that should give you enough time to complete the mission.”

“So what are you planning, Luca?” Miranda asked. “Are you going after Fredrick?”

“That’s always been my plan—you know that. But it’s now dependent on that quantum intelligence going online and syncing with the wider QI hive-mind. However, I suspect that even my part in all this is just one element in an even greater plan. One that’s been in the making for a very long time.”

“Miranda, come on, let’s get moving.” Scott frantically gestured to her from where he and the others were loading the crates onto a motorized trolley.

“Gotta go, Luca. We won’t let you down. Stay safe.” Miranda signed off and rushed to catch up with the rest of them.

Cyrus stopped for a second, raising a hand for the others to do likewise. They had passed into a long, narrow corridor with glass walls on either side, behind which were row upon row of server racks all humming with the background noise of coolant fans. He held a hand to his temple, adjusting something on his visor, checking the internal schematic he was using. He pointed down along the corridor. “We need to keep going straight, through two more sets of doors. That will lead us directly to the quantum bay.”

They picked up the pace, moving with haste down the long corridor. They almost made it to the end when the door behind them suddenly burst open and several guards came rushing through.

Ferro, one of the Martian crew, was hit by the first blast before anyone even knew what was happening.

“Everybody down!” Miranda shouted as she dropped to the floor and returned fire, followed by Scott and Captain Rickmann. Hudson, the other Martian crew member, began dragging Ferro back behind their hastily formed line.

“Come on, this way, door’s open!” Cyrus shouted from the far

end of the corridor.

The guards retreated under the onslaught of frantic plasma fire being directed at them. Cyrus hauled the crates out through the door as the others fought a rearguard action. One by one, they backed out the door. Hudson dragged Ferro out first, last was Miranda. Scott and Rickmann pushed at a tall, heavy vending machine, toppling it over and heaving it up against the door, which now crackled and sparked from a barrage of plasma fire.

“Jeez, that was intense.” Cyrus wiped a bead of sweat from his brow. “Where the heck did they come from?”

“It was only a matter of time,” said Hudson as he helped the injured Ferro to her feet. She was clutching her right thigh. “Can you walk?” he asked.

“Well, I’m sure as hell not hanging around here.” She stood up, hopping on one leg.

“We need to keep moving. It isn’t going to take them long to get through that door.” Miranda glanced back at Scott and Rickmann, who were shoving another vending machine across the door.

They were in a wide, circular atrium that served as a recreation space for the techs working at the facility. In the center was a sunken floor with seating and copious tropical plants. A door suddenly opened to their right, and a startled-looking tech froze when he saw several plasma weapons swing around to face him.

“Beat it!” Scott shouted at him, waving his weapon to emphasize the point.

The tech ducked back inside immediately.

“This way, come on.” Cyrus began dragging one of the crates. “I hope this core still functions after all the hammering it’s been taking.”

They crossed the space and in through another door on the opposite side, leading them into yet another long corridor with rows of server racks on either side. They moved as fast as they could, given Ferro’s injury. Miranda took up the rear, expecting at any moment for the door to open and guards to come pouring in. She tried raising Luca on comms but, as usual, she was not responding. They barreled through the final door at the far end and into a wide, circular space. It was sparse and clinical, with a raised dais at its center.

“This is it,” Cyrus announced. “Let’s get the QI core unpacked.”

Ferro sat down on the floor, groaning as she did.

“How long is it going to take, Cyrus?” Miranda asked as she glanced back at the door, aiming her weapon at it.

“As long as it takes, Miranda. I’m an engineer, not a magician.”

Miranda sighed. “We can only hold them off for so long.”

“I know, I know, now stop talking and let me get on with it.”

Luca burst through on general comms. “They’ve finally figured out what’s going on and are trying to cut the power. I’m holding them off for the moment. I’m also keeping the guards busy, but just to warn you, there’s a large group heading your way. I’ll see what I can do, but be prepared.” She signed off again before anyone had a chance to respond.

Scott placed a hand on Cyrus’s shoulder. “Okay, buddy. Let’s get to work.”

They set up a hasty defensive position back outside in the long corridor, utilizing the now empty crates and a few overturned server racks. Scott, Miranda, Rickmann, Hudson, and even the injured Ferro all crouched behind it and waited for the door at the far end to open and all hell to pile through.

Scott and Miranda exchanged a glance. “Here we go again,” Scott said with a wink.

COMMAND OF ASSETS

Luca worked her way along a series of maintenance tunnels toward the administrative sector, but it was still at least two kilometers away and her progress was being slowed by the narrowness of some of the tunnels, and her need to keep focusing on the data-stream. It was hard to do both at the same time. Every now and again she would have to stop so she could monitor the progress of the others. Each time she did, she could feel more and more node runners being brought to bear on tracking her down. So far she had evaded them, but now they had finally joined up the dots and had a pretty clear idea of what was happening. The QI core was here and would soon be back online.

All sectors were being put into lockdown, all security forces were being mobilized, and all node runners were searching for her. However, the chaos brought about by hacking the transport system was hampering the deployment of security forces, along with several rampaging battle-droids. Yet a strong contingent was closing in on the datacenter even though Luca had several security drones taking pot shots at them. On top of that, several node runners were trying desperately to cut the power to the facility. She needed to stop and deal with the unfolding situation even though security was growing ever tighter around the administrative sector, and every minute she wasted would only make it harder for her to isolate VanHeilding. But she had no choice; she needed that QI core to go online.

She felt the tendrils of a node runner honing in on her as she probed the power system for the datacenter. He must have been a novice because he came straight at her with a neural attack, which Luca swatted away as if it were nothing. Yet now that they had a trace on her, more piled in and it became increasingly problematic for her to ignore it. They left her no option; she pivoted in her mind and bore down on them with as much force as she dared. She swamped their minds with an explosion of neural data, overwhelming the celestial cortex. They backed off, for now, but

she knew they would return. This might have been just a test. The next time would be a fight to the death.

But now was not the time for such thoughts, and Luca returned to the task at hand. She isolated the power system from further node-runner intervention by setting up blocks and traps. It should keep them out for a while. Luca then moved on and redirected several battle-droids and security drones to focus their harassment of the security forces in and around the datacenter. Last, she warned Miranda that trouble was coming and that they needed to hurry.

Luca disengaged from the data-stream and continued on her way. She had progressed another kilometer when the first security drone came hovering down the tunnel. It was so quiet that she hadn't noticed. Fortunately, Fly alerted her in time. It took her a moment to get control of the drone—much too long. It would have had ample time to transmit an alert in the first few seconds of spotting her.

“Crap. They know where we are now, Fly. We need to get out of here quick.”

“There is an exit a few meters ahead. Shall I go up and take a look?”

“No wait, I'll use this security drone. If there are any guards on the other side, I'd rather they shoot at it.”

“That is greatly appreciated, Luca.”

She reached the exit, an overhead hatch accessed by a small set of steps. The drone hovered below. A moment later, she had deactivated the locking mechanism and it began to hinge open. The drone buzzed out.

In her mind's eye she could now see the area around the hatch through the drone's sensors. “All clear,” she said after a while. “Let's get out of here.”

Luca exited the maintenance tunnel network into a narrow street. She was getting close to the administrative sector, one of the oldest parts of New World One, so this area had a dense, urban feel to it. Although the maximum height of any structure inside the vast habitat was only three stories, the buildings on either side of the street seemed to tower over her. Ahead she could see an intersection, busy with people going about their daily business. But as she turned out onto the main street, she got a sense that they

were all frustrated by the transport chaos and the subsequent sector lockdown imposed by the habitat security. Fly rose high into the air and Luca could now get a better sense of how far she still had to go.

The administrative buildings had a cordon of security around them—guards, droids, multiple airborne drones. Another contingent was moving down along the street toward her location, presumably coming to investigate the exit, now that she had been sighted close by.

She dodged behind a group of pedestrians, following for a bit until she had the opportunity to cross the street without being spotted. Overhead, Fly tagged several security drones also heading her way. She stepped into the cover of a doorway and entered the data-stream again. This time she could feel a heightened intensity in the data, as if the entire habitat was experiencing a rush of digital adrenaline—it fizzed with frenetic activity. She took control of the security drones that Fly had tagged and rerouted them toward one of the entrances to the administrative sector.

They swooped down low and buzzed the security guards, who dived out of the way. Luca checked the drone's weapons systems. Pulsed Energy Projectile set to nonlethal for crowd control, fully charged and good for approximately twenty rounds each. She dialed up the intensity, which should be enough to incapacitate an average adult for an hour or so, maybe longer. But this gave her only five rounds per drone. *Should be enough*, she thought.

The guards had resumed their positions, this time keeping an eye on the hovering drones. Luca fired. Five incandescent balls of plasma energy shot out of the drones, hitting all five guards. All dropped like stones. She ran for the entrance, and Fly followed along with several of the security drones, all now under her control.

Luca entered into a high glass atrium. Two startled guards jumped up from a control desk, until they too were blasted by a drone. On her left was the elevator that would take her up to the top floor; from there she planned to get out onto the flat roof of the building. She should be able to get all the way to the operations center, where Fredrick VanHeilding huddled with his security team. She sent the drones back outside the building to give her cover when she exited up top.

As the elevator rose, she took a moment to jack-in and check on the situation at the datacenter. A grueling firefight was taking place

in the corridor outside the quantum bay. Scott looked injured; he was holding his weapon with just one hand. Several guards were also down. “Shit,” Luca said out loud.

“What’s the matter?” said Fly, who had taken up a position on the roof of the elevator, clinging to a vent.

“The others need help, and fast. Too much going on all at once.” Luca searched the local area for assets she could utilize to bring to bear on the fight going on outside the quantum bay, but as soon as she began probing the data-stream, several node runners materialized and began to coordinate a data block. This was a new strategy. Rather than take her on directly, they were combining their neural power in an effort to counter her control of the data-stream, and it was working. Luca found herself getting bogged down, wasting time that she didn’t have. She pulled out just as the elevator reached the top floor and the doors opened, having failed to take command of any assets.

Fly went ahead to scout out the route that would bring Luca out onto the roof. When it reported back *all clear*, Luca made her way to the ladder and exited out onto the roof. Overhead she could see the security drones she had commandeered earlier waiting for her. Luca now gave them new instructions: to fly to the datacenter, gain access to the quantum bay, and attack the security guards laying siege to it. She watched as they moved off at maximum speed, hoping they would get there in time.

Luca turned back to scan the roof area only to see two battle-droids clambering across the flat terrain toward her at speed. She considered recalling the security droids, but realized it was too late for that as the first plasma blasts smashed down around her.

She dove for the roof hatch, tumbling back down through the opening, and landing hard on the floor below with a grunt. She picked herself up and ran for cover through an open door. Fly was still aloft, so she could see in her mind’s eye the two droids making for the roof hatch. Behind them, two more droids climbed onto the roof, followed by a third.

“Luca, more battle-droids coming your way. I count five altogether,” said the micro-drone.

“I see them, Fly, I see them.”

“Regrettably, my weapons system is ineffective against such adversaries.”

Luca took a moment to compose herself, breathing slowly. There

was no way out of this by running; she would have to get control of one or more of those droids, and that meant facing off against a more formidable node-runner army. She stood her ground and focused on the data-stream.

The assault was instantaneous, a barrage of focused neural data rushing into her cerebral cortex. A sensory overload so intense that she had difficulty simply standing upright. She let out a groan, clasped her head with both hands, and slowly slumped to the floor—such was the ferocity of the neural attack. And worse, somewhere in the depths of all the signal noise she sensed one of the droids had dropped through the roof hatch. It was now in the corridor, only moments away from finding her.

Luca needed to get a grip on the attack, and fast. She took a deep breath and stopped fighting the neural assault. Instead she fought down her panic and let the data-stream wash over her, seeking out its frequency. She soon found its resonance and began to ride the wave. Where before she was drowning in a sea of neural chaos, she found that she could now shift and bend with it, working her way toward an understanding of its waveform, and slowly she began to generate her own opposing frequency. This she grew in intensity, building its amplitude until at last it started to cancel out the attack. The droid appeared in the open doorway, scanning the room for her location.

The node-runner attack began to falter. The intensity was too much for some of the weaker minds that had been seconded into the assault. Luca could feel them becoming overwhelmed and the harmonics of their minds turning one by one into white noise—brain death.

A second droid had now reached the doorway as the first began to move into the room, scanning for her life-form as it entered.

The tsunami in her head began to build as Luca countered the attack, folding it back against itself and directing it outward onto the node-runner hive mind. Luca tweaked its resonance, creating a feedback loop that grew and multiplied exponentially until she finally felt it crash against their collective neural consciousness.

All was quiet, save for a low background hiss of neural static.

Luca then broke through into the data-stream proper, seeking out control of the battle-droid that was only meters away from her. But it had already found her, zeroing in on her location and priming its plasma weapon.

“Run, Luca. I cannot hold it off much longer,” Fly’s voice burst into her mind. The little drone frantically hovered in front of the droid’s targeting system, preventing it from acquiring a lock on Luca. The droid tried to reposition itself, but each time the drone would shift and buzz. In frustration, it fired on the drone.

“No.” Luca screamed. “Fly!”

But the drone didn’t answer.

The droid retargeted its weapon system, this time on Luca. But it was too late; she had finally acquired control. It disengaged and instead turned a full 180 degrees and unleashed a barrage of fire on the second droid entering through the open doorway.

Luca stood up, a little unsteadily, using a hand against the wall to balance herself. She heard a buzz and the little drone hovered into view.

“Fly, you’re alive.”

“Not in the strict sense of the word, but I am still functioning, if that is what you mean.”

“I thought the droid vaporized you.”

“That machine has a ponderously slow mind in comparison to the hyper-agility of my neural network. I almost feel sorry for it.”

Luca took a few slow breaths to calm herself down and refocus on external events. The QI was still not fully online, and the fight had reached a point of desperation, as they had now abandoned the hallway and retreated inside the quantum bay. But there was still hope. The assault had been slowed by the pileup of bodies in the narrow corridor and the security drones had just entered the building, felling anyone and anything that got in their way.

There was also a noticeable absence of node-runner activity. Had she eliminated them all? The thought frightened her. Were they all now brain dead? But there was no time to reflect on this; Fredrick VanHeilding was still her target, and if he sensed the tide was turning then he may try and escape. She needed to hurry.

“Time to go,” she said to the drone. “Back out onto the roof. This time I think we’ll bring a few of our own battle-droids, even if they are slow and ponderous.”

THE SIGNAL

Dakota ran a hand over the sleek surface of the command console on the bridge of Daedalus. He had never been in a ship so luxurious, so well crafted, so expensive. He found it hard to believe that such ships existed and wondered at the kind of wealth that was needed to commission such a craft. It was obscene in his mind. Yet, it was his now, so he better get used to it.

He strapped himself into the commander's chair, upholstered in real leather hide, a material so expensive that he had only ever seen an example in a museum. The rest of the crew were also having difficulty coming to terms with the gross extravagance of the ship. They were floating on the bridge, looking, touching, and generally shaking their heads in disbelief.

"Well screw me sideways with a big stick, would you look at that." Aeon had activated the forward monitor that blossomed to life with a 230-degree perspective of space, directly forward of the ship. The clarity was astounding; it felt like they could float out into the vastness.

"We should have kept the QI core, Cap," Angus said as he strapped himself into another of the command seats. "I still don't see why we let the Martians have it."

"It's better with them—they know how to get it online, they know what they're doing." Dakota gestured at the console embedded in the seat's armrest.

"They'll never get it into New World One," Angus continued. "Not even with that weird psycho-girl they have."

"That weird psycho-girl, as you call her, saved all our asses. If not for her, we'd all be floating out in the void. If anyone can get them inside New World One, it'll be her."

"We should have persuaded her to join the fight on Elektra, that's where this is all going down," said Aeon. "Screw New World One, they're just a bunch of pussies. They never even tried to put up a fight."

Dakota ignored her and instead scanned the camera feeds. The

final loading had been complete, everybody was on board including the dead and injured crew from the battle. Those that hadn't made it out with their lives were stored in one of the cargo holds; their families would be informed once they got to Elektra—if they got to Elektra. The injured were being treated in the state-of-the-art medbay on board. Most, if not all, would be back and ready for action in no time.

They had also acquired a dozen or so of the Xiang Zu battle-droids, which the Martian tech had assured him could be controlled from the bridge of Daedalus. Brooker was already working on this, testing out the interface. They would be a very useful asset to have in the forthcoming battle.

"If everybody is finished moaning and complaining, can we get this show on the road?" Dakota called out over the general comm.

"All on board, Cap. Everything stowed away, ready for departure," Angus responded.

"Well, okay then. Let's get going." He pointed at the vast expanse of space displayed on the panoramic bridge monitor.

Alerts sounded, warning the crew to get strapped in. The ship began to hum, building in intensity as the engines came up to full power. It moved forward, gently at first, clearing the area of the old spaceport. Then began to accelerate, increasing thrust until almost everybody on board blacked out with the gee forces.

Elektra, classified as a minor planet in the Belt, was unique in that it was the only known quadruple asteroid system. It had three satellites, thought to be shards of the main body, blown out by some major impact in the ancient past. It was approximately two hundred and fifty kilometers at its widest point and, as such, had a feeble gravitational pull compared to Earth, or even Ceres.

So when people referred to the population center of Elektra, they were not referring to the primary asteroid body—they were referring instead to an assembly of space stations that had grown up within the quadruple system. Few people existed on the surface of Elektra, only miners and support staff, and then for only brief periods of time.

This amalgam of space habitat infrastructure had grown over the years into the second largest population center in the Belt. It was a hodgepodge of habitats that now accommodated some twenty thousand fiercely independent people, who were all preparing to

fight to maintain that independence.

Daedalus slowed to a parking coordinate behind S/2003, a six-kilometer-diameter satellite of the primary Elektra asteroid, approximately fifteen hundred kilometers away from the main center of population. This, Dakota reckoned, would give them some time to scout out the approach with the least possibility of being spotted.

They had made the journey in half the time it would have taken in his old ship, so chances were good that the Xiang Zu fleet encircling the enclave would still be in the dark as to the outcome of the battle for the old spaceport. Yet, arriving in a stolen VanHeilding ship, particularly one that had belonged to a high-ranking member of the family, would almost certainly prompt interception and investigation.

Dakota, Angus, Aeon, and some of the other crew gathered around the central holo-table on the ship's bridge, studying a real-time asteroid map of the local region. In the center was the space station enclave of Elektra with the primary asteroid looming large behind it. A multitude of illuminated dots illustrated the locations of several ships, all stationary relative to the enclave.

"Which ships are Xiang Zu?" Dakota asked, pointing at the dots.

"All of them," Aeon replied.

"Holy cow, that's a lot of hardware!" Angus exclaimed. "Where did they get so many?"

"Screwing over other families' mining infrastructure all over this region of the Belt and taking their assets, including ships," said Aeon, waving a hand at the dots. "That's why it's such a mixed bag. We're talking freighters, transports, tugs, even a barge or two. They stick a few cannon on them and press them into service."

Dakota nodded. "I think we need to contact the resistance on Elektra directly and find out what's going on, see if they have a plan. We don't want to go in there all guns blazing and end up screwing things up."

"There's no way communications will go unnoticed," Brooker interjected.

"True." Dakota nodded. "But direct comms with my brother might."

The crew looked from one to the other; no one spoke.

"Keep an eye on things. I'll be in the state room—there's good

comms there.” Dakota pushed himself away from the holo-table and out from the bridge.

Dakota had refused to use Sebastian’s staterooms as his quarters on board Daedalus, regarding them as way too ostentatious for his humble tastes. Instead he had taken a less commodious cabin on the lower decks, beside where his crew were located. However, the comms setup Sebastian had implemented in his quarters were the best on the ship, excluding the bridge. And this was a conversation he preferred to keep private, as it had been quite some time since he and his brother had talked. He wasn’t even sure if he could still contact him, and even if he did, that his brother would take the call. But he had to try, and now was the time.

He strapped himself into a plush seat in the stateroom, connected his personal area data network to the ship’s AI, and instructed it to seek out the contact location of his brother, Quinn.

It didn’t take long. Less that minute later he was face-to-face with a hazy holographic projection of Quinn, sitting in a darkened room with what looked to Dakota like a group of fighters, waiting for the shit to go down. His face wore a tired, beaten look. The look of a man twice his age.

“Hello, brother. I see you’ve been doing well for yourself. Nice digs you’ve got there,” Quinn almost sneered.

Dakota glanced around reflexively at the luxurious interior of the ship’s stateroom. “Don’t let this fool you, Quinn. It’s not mine.”

“Stolen, I presume.” Quinn raised an eyebrow.

Dakota hesitated for a beat. “Eh...yes, but not by me.”

“Figures.” His brother sighed. “So what you want this time? If you’re looking for a place to hide out again, you can forget it. Go and take your troubles somewhere else. We’re sick of taking the heat for your wrecking-ball lifestyle.”

“No, believe it or not, this time I’m here to help.”

Quinn gave a half-hearted snort. “Really? You...actually help?”

Dakota became silent. His head lowered, and he fingered the edging of the seat. “I’m not the person you think I am, at least, not anymore. There comes a time in a man’s life when he gets to thinking about what really matters.” Dakota gave a dismissive wave of his hand. “Ah...maybe I’m getting old, I don’t know. But it came to me that I needed to pick a side.” He looked at his brother. “So I’m here to fight. Fight for what’s right.”

It was Quinn's turn to go silent. He gave a barely audible sigh and pushed his unkempt hair back off his forehead. "I suppose we're all getting old. But if what you're telling me is true, then all I can say is...I'm very glad to have you on our side. God knows we could do with it. I don't know how much longer we can hold out against this blockade—we're living off fumes here." He gave a strained smile.

"All is not as hopeless as you think, Quinn." He leaned closer to the projection, and spoke in almost hushed tones. "There is a person...a person that possesses a power beyond anything I could ever have imagined. I've seen this firsthand, seen what she can do." He waved a hand around. "It was she who gave me this ship."

Quinn's eyes widened, his voice low. "I've heard some of these stories before. But they're just myths, bar talk for old drunks who want to sound profound. Are you saying these stories are real?"

"Believe it, brother. She's not a myth."

"Well, I'll be damned." Quinn shook his head and ran a hand through his thick hair again. "Will she help us?"

"After a fashion. Her beef is with Fredrick VanHeilding back on New World One, that's where she's heading along with a number of others who have a quantum intelligence core that was, eh...stolen a few months back. Their mission is to get it back online. If they pull that off, then they'll be helping us indirectly. With a QI back in control of this region, Xiang Zu's wings will be clipped."

Quinn's face morphed into a look of astonishment. "Is this true? Can a quantum intelligence do all they say it can, or is it just another myth?"

Dakota shook his head. "That, I honestly don't know. All I can say is, smarter people than you or I believe so. They think getting it back online can end this war. And maybe it will. Then again, maybe it won't, or they'll fail in the attempt. What I'm saying is we still need to take the fight to Xiang Zu, regardless."

Quinn gave his estranged brother a considered look. "What've you got in mind?"

"Who runs the show down there? Who's in command?"

"It's a bit of a hodgepodge of different groups. Nobody has faced this before. But Central are the ones that most people look to to take the lead."

"Can you contact them?"

"Yeah, we're pretty tight, good communications. But you still

haven't told me what you're planning."

"I'm planning to do what I always do in these types of situations—shoot first and clean up the mess later." He gave a wink. "Xiang Zu are just sitting and waiting, so we take them now, while they least expect it. This ship is state of the art: very fast, highly maneuverable, and well-armed. We also have a dozen battle-droids under my command. So, the plan is to go in hard and fast. What you need to do is convince Central to send out any ships you have to join the battle. We could take them." Dakota held a clenched fist up in front of him.

"Jeez, I don't know." Quinn screwed his mouth up. "We've got no battleships or anything like that. All we got are barges and tugs with a few plasma cannon strapped onto the hull."

"That's all we need. Xiang Zu's fleet isn't much better. Most of them have been grabbed from the outposts."

"Central will take some convincing to get them to row in with that plan. Their strategy is all about defense."

"But you'll try?"

Quinn gave a reluctant nod. "Yeah, I'll try."

"Good. Tell them to get ready, tell them to wait for my signal."

"What's the signal?"

Dakota gave a wry smile. "Mayhem, brother. Mayhem."

SYSTEM GLITCH

Fredrick VanHeilding paced around the operations center in New World One at the same time as watching a cascade of chaos unfold across the habitat, and beyond. It had taken some time to unpack the seeming random pattern of transportation lockdowns, rogue security drones, rampaging battle-droids, and datacenter hacks into a clear picture of what the heck was going on. But now it had become real. Luca was here, in the habitat, and she was coming for him. Worse, she had been aided by her treacherous mother, Miranda, and a group of Martian military, who were currently attempting to activate the stolen QI core inside the habitat's primary datacenter.

Battles seemed to rage everywhere, none more fiercely than inside the datacenter itself, where Miranda and her scumbag comrades were holding his security forces at bay with the aid of several compromised battle-droids and security drones. This was something that could not be allowed to happen. If that QI were to become active, then things would get a lot more difficult for VanHeilding, not to mention his partners in this venture, the Xiang Zu Corporation. Therefore, more and more forces were being allocated to the data-center battle.

That was until Luca finally showed up in the data-stream. She had given away her location and by doing so had become top priority. If she could be cornered and killed, then the data-center battle would be over in seconds. Battle-droids, security drones, and armed forces all now rushed to her location to engage.

But Fredrick was under no illusions as to just how formidable an opponent Luca really was. She was an extremely powerful node runner, but there must be a limit to how much she could control and manipulate at any one time. Already she was controlling the transportation lockdown as well as multiple battle-droids and security drones at several different locations all over the vast habitat. If she could be further engaged by a battle group, then that could give his own node runners the opportunity to finally take her

on in the data-stream and ultimately take her down, once and for all.

As Fredrick glanced across the operations center area, he could see them all jacking in and getting ready to engage. One-on-one they were no match for her, but as a collective they stood a chance, particularly when Luca's mind was utilizing so much of its bandwidth to manipulate the ongoing chaos.

He waited anxiously, pacing the area, and flashing quick glances at the incoming data on the display monitors. It didn't help that some admin tech had managed to obtain a feed from the battle raging out at the mining enclave of Elektra. To Fredrick's horror, he realized that it was being broadcast from the bridge of Sebastian VanHeilding's ship, Daedalus. The one that Luca had stolen back on Mars. His rage was at a boiling point. This was the ultimate insult to his family name. A VanHeilding ship attacking the Xiang Zu fleet. It showed a mass of junkyard ships all moving out from Elektra to engage the blockaders, all to the soundtrack of a mercenary captain spewing out rebel propaganda on an open broadcast.

"Turn that goddamn feed off!" VanHeilding's voice bellowed across the operations area. A timid admin tech tapped an icon on his console. The feed went dead.

"We have her, sir. She's on the run. Droids are closing in." The main screen in the room flickered to a camera feed from a droid. It was not far from this location and showed several plasma blasts screeching across a rooftop, and Luca disappearing down a hatch. The droid moved fast, reaching the hatch and dropping down after her. Several more droids follow behind.

So far she had not tried to take control of them; she was running scared, she knew what was waiting for her if she tried to jack-in to the data-stream. VanHeilding glanced over at the node runners. "Don't let me down this time," he said to himself.

The droid scanned the corridor, flipped to infrared, and found a heat signature a few rooms away. Luca had finally run out of road; she was trapped between the prospect of a neural onslaught from a collective node-runner assault or the high-energy blast from a droid cannon. He held his breath.

Suddenly there was a power drop in the room, the lights dimmed for a split-second, screens glitched, projections flickered. VanHeilding instinctively glanced over to where the node runners were jacked-in. Something was happening.

“She’s in,” a tech shouted out. “She’s jacked-in.”

On the main monitor, the droid drew ever closer to the heat signature. But VanHeilding wasn’t interested in seeing it. His concern now was with the node runners. He rushed into the runner bay and looked at the biometrics; all were running hot. *Holy crap*, he thought, *she’s actually taking them on—all of them*.

Alerts squealed out from one of the node-runner bays as the biometrics flatlined, then another, and another. VanHeilding backed away as more succumbed to brain death.

He looked back at the main monitor; the droid looked down on the writhing figure of Luca. “Take the shot, take the goddamned shot!” he screamed at the monitor. But the view changed. The droid swung around, flipped back to the visual spectrum, and blasted a second droid that was following close behind.

Fredrick VanHeilding froze, his eyes fixed on the screen. Over in the node-runner bay, biometric alarms screeched. Slowly he began to think the unthinkable—maybe he was going to need that escape ship after all.

“Sir,” a tech called over, “the QI core has been activated and is commencing a data-sync.”

“Has it gained control yet?” His voice sounded feeble.

“No, sir. It will take time to become fully operable.”

“How long?”

“Eh.” The tech consulted the data monitors. “Best guess, ten to fifteen minutes.”

That might be enough, he thought. But he had no time to lose. Already the battle-droid, now under Luca’s control, was moving toward the main entrance of the operations center. It was time to get out, and fast.

MOTOR SKILLS

Luca sensed the quantum core go online, sensed it seeking out its brethren across the system at superluminal speeds. And with the data-stream within New World One now free of node-runner activity, she was free to roam where she wanted. *Have I killed them all?* she wondered. Yet, she knew it was not good for her to dwell on this. No good could come of it, best move on and finish the job.

She opened a comms channel with Miranda. “How you all holding up?”

Miranda replied in breathy, staccato sentences. “QI online, but Scott’s badly injured, still hanging in there.”

“Security forces have backed off from the datacenter,” said Luca. “Too many droids and drones defending it now. Looks like the battle is over for you.”

“Cyrus says QI still syncing.”

“Yeah, I noticed. Another ten minutes or so and it will have full control, game over. I’ll get a medical team to your location.”

“Where are you?”

“Oh, I’m on a mission. There’s a rat I have to track down and take care of, but I don’t think it’ll be too much of a problem. Gotta go, catch you later.” She signed off.

Luca had sent several battle-droids to the operations center, more as a distraction than as an attempt to snare Fredrick VanHeilding. She knew that once he saw the QI go online, he’d figure his time was up and make a run for it. And now that the data-stream was free of node runners, Luca could track him and follow at her leisure.

He was heading for a small, fast ship that was docked to the exterior hull of the New World One habitat, not far from the operations center. It was an escape ship that would be flung clear, due to the habitat’s spin, by simply disengaging the docking port. It didn’t even need to power up its engines.

Luca could see him via a camera feed jogging down the long corridor. A security drone flew overhead, and behind him followed

by a battle-droid and two others of VanHeilding's entourage. But as he passed a set of fire doors, Luca activated them, slamming them shut and isolating VanHeilding in the corridor. He stopped, looked back at the doors, and cursed. He started banging at the control panel, to no avail. He turned back and ran for the ship, alone.

Luca looked at Fly. "Well, the time has come. Are you ready?"

"I am always ready, Luca."

"Okay, then. Let's get this done."

VanHeilding's escape ship could not detach from the habitat without disengaging the docking mechanism, and Luca had control of that. So no matter what VanHeilding tried, he could not escape. Yet, as Luca approached the ship's access hatch, she needed to be on high alert. A trapped rat could be a formidable foe. She stood to one side of the hatch and gave the command to open it. As she suspected, a barrage of plasma fire burst out. Luca nodded to Fly, and the little drone entered.

She heard more plasma fire and then silence. A moment later, Fly flew out again. "Done. You can come in now."

Luca stepped onto the ship and made her way to the cockpit. There, slumped on the control seat, was Fredrick VanHeilding, his head tilted to one side, a small barb protruding from his neck.

Luca reached over and plucked it out. "Is he still aware?" she asked Fly.

"Yes. I only shot him with a low dose. He can't move, but he's still awake."

Luca moved in front of the paralyzed VanHeilding, adjusted his head so it was upright in the seat, and looked directly into his eyes. She could see the rage in there as he struggled to move. But he was very much aware; his eyes blinked a few times.

"So, my dear grandfather, I believe you wanted to see me? Well, here I am." She sat down in an adjacent seat and looked up at the wraparound monitor that served as the front window of the ship. It currently displayed exactly what would be seen if it was indeed a true window. The vast, gleaming expanse of the habitat's hull bisected the view. Above it was the blackness of space.

"Planning on leaving us, just when things were getting interesting?" She looked over at Fredrick. A pained expression was etched on his face, his breathing labored.

Luca returned to gazing at the view. "You know, you completely

screwed my life up.” Her voice was low, matter-of-fact. “You turned me into a monster, someone most people fear. As for the others? Well, they think I’m a god, a deity to be worshipped.” She looked over at Fredrick again. He blinked.

“How can I live in this world anymore? How can I be...normal?” She held his gaze for a beat. “You did this. You and your family and your genetics corporation. I was just another experiment to you, like so many before me, I imagine.” She gave a sigh. “Still, what’s done is done, and neither you nor I, nor your screwed-up corporation, can change that, can we?”

The corners of Fredrick’s eyes seemed to tighten.

“Nevertheless, you must pay the price. And so there’s a little show I’ve prepared for you.”

Luca disengaged momentarily from her one-sided conversation with her grandfather and jacked-in to the data-stream. The QI had finished its sync. It was now fully integrated into the QI hive-mind and communicating across the system at superluminal speeds, enabling Luca to contact Athena back on Earth in real time.

Luca, glad to see you are still alive and well, the soft sonorous voice of the QI resonated in her head.

“Thank you, Athena, so am I. Are we ready to activate the plan?”

Yes, everything is still in place.

“Do we have a satellite over the area?”

I took the liberty of repositioning one with an excellent high-resolution camera feed. It is ready when you are.

“Very well, let the show begin.” Luca shifted her mind back to Fredrick VanHeilding. His head had drooped to one side.

“You need to pay attention to this.” She leaned over and unceremoniously jerked his head upright and wedged it into the seat’s headrest. “That’s better. Wouldn’t want you to miss seeing this.” Luca pointed at the screen.

With that, the view on the panoramic screen changed to an aerial view of the VanHeilding Corporation’s subarctic research lab. The image was blurry at first but quickly flicked into focus.

Fredrick gave an audible groan.

“Fly, how soon before that curare wares off?” Luca studied her grandfather’s face.

“Full motor function restored in approximately forty-five minutes depending on body mass, etcetera. But it’s a gradual

process, so expect some feeble movement from around the ten-minute mark.”

“Hmmm.” Luca screwed her mouth up. Then took out her plasma pistol, set it to stun, and placed it on her lap with the muzzle pointing at Fredrick. She patted his arm. “Just don’t try anything stupid. Okay?” Luca waved the pistol at him.

Fredrick didn’t answer.

“You know this place, I think.” She pointed at the image on the screen. “It’s your primary research facility. The place where you keep all the knowledge that makes your corporation and your family one of the most powerful in the system.” She glanced over at him to make sure he was paying attention.

“You see, when I killed your moronic cousin Sebastian, and stole his ship, all I wanted to do was come here and kill you. But then I got to thinking. I realized that it wouldn’t be true justice, considering what you did to me, how you robbed me of normality, and turned me into a freak to be experimented on. So I thought, what could I take from you that would redress the balance? And the answer was to take away all that gives you and your corrupt family power. So I set in motion a plan to do exactly that.” She pointed at the screen again. “Watch.”

The satellite feed showed movement around the facility. Something was happening; several technical vehicles were snaking their way to the entrances of main buildings: fire trucks, medical units, people transports. As all this was happening, Luca continued.

“It started with a conversation I had with Xenon Hybrid on Mars.” Luca glanced over at VanHeilding, who seemed to be sitting a bit more upright in the seat. “You’ve heard of him, I’m guessing. He’s kind of a weird character, ancient, and possibly not even Homo sapiens. But he told me a very interesting thing: that every single genetic breakthrough and patent that the VanHeilding Corporation possesses was based on technology stolen from Mars. Which, if true, means that you and your corporation don’t own shit.” She looked back to Fredrick to see if he was getting all this. His eyes had a distinctly angry look. Luca nodded and returned to the screen. “So I broke into this facility a while back and had a good long look through your state secrets, and guess what I found? That’s right, everything Xenon had told me was true.”

By now the satellite feed was showing masses of workers hurrying out of the facility and piling onto waiting transports.

“So I stole it all, and right this very minute it’s being disseminated out across the grid.” She looked over at VanHeilding again. “That’s right, every science lab in the entire system now has access to all that research. You no longer have the monopoly, now everybody has it.”

Fredrick VanHeilding seemed to bare his teeth and struggled to expel a long, angry, guttural sound. On screen, the last of the people had been evacuated from the facility and the transports began moving off up the valley to the accommodation blocks. Tents were being set up, with teams in hazmat suits ready to process the people when they arrived.

“But I did more than just release all your research.” Luca pointed at the screen. “They’re all evacuating because of a Level Four bio-leak alert. But don’t worry, it’s a false alarm, it’s just to get everyone to leave the area.” She again looked over to VanHeilding, who had now regained enough motor skills to contort his face into a look of horror. “Now, I want you to watch very, very carefully. See”—Luca pointed at the screen—“they’re all out, and up at the evacuation point. Okay, Athena, do it now.”

For a moment, nothing happened. Then the ground directly over the subterranean facility began to crumple inward, creating a hundred-meter-wide dip. Then it exploded outward in a sudden release of violent energy. The blast rippled across the screen. Dust and rubble flew high into the air, obscuring the view. The satellite image pulled back to show a massive cloud of dust covering most of the site.

“And poof! It’s all gone.” Luca snapped her fingers.

VanHeilding groaned and gurgled and struggled to move his paralyzed body.

Luca granted him a contemptuous look as he withered in his seat. “All gone. Your empire is no more, everything that made your corporation, and your family, what they were is now free for anyone who wants it. And your...oh-so-precious research labs are nothing more than a cloud of dust.”

She raised herself off the seat and stood up. “Well, I enjoyed our little chat, but I’m going to leave you now. Things to do, people to meet. And I don’t want to delay you from wherever it is you’re planning on going in this ship. But just so you know, I’ve disabled the ship’s power.” She leaned over him. “And you’re kinda stuck in that seat for a while, so good luck figuring out how to survive past

the next hour or so.”

Luca walked off the ship to the frantic, guttural groans of Fredrick VanHeilding. She shut the outer hatch, and released the ship from its dock. It spun off the hull of the habitat and out into deep space.

SUMITOMO SHIPYARD

Scott ran through a few preliminary flight checks as he waited for Cyrus to arrive. *What's keeping him?* he thought. The small shuttle craft was next-gen Martian tech, so his checks weren't really necessary; he was more interested in finding out what this craft was capable of. He glanced out through the cockpit window across the spaceport apron and the great domes of Jezero City on Mars. *It's a good place to live*, he thought to himself. He had been in far worse places. They knew how to look after people here.

An alert flashed on the dash console indicating the outer airlock door had been activated, and a moment later Cyrus entered the cabin. He unclipped his EVA suit helmet and gloves, climbed into the cockpit, and sat down beside Scott.

"You made it," said Scott. "For a moment I thought you weren't coming."

"Sorry, I was looking for a rust bucket. I didn't think they'd let you loose on something this fancy." He rubbed a hand along the exquisitely upholstered arm rest. "Nice."

"Ha, actually I bought it. It's a former Xiang Zu family shuttle. Got it as part of their reparations settlement. It has a stupidly overpowered fusion reactor with enough juice to generate its own radiation shield. Ridiculous for a craft of this size."

"Does it make coffee?"

Scott glanced over at his buddy with a wry smile. "Actually, it does. You just ask it."

"Stop, I'm getting envious." Cyrus settled into the seat and strapped himself in. "So, where's this old boneyard you want to show me?"

"It's not too far, we'll be there in twenty minutes." Scott gestured at the control screen and the craft began to gently lift off from the pad. It rotated around sixty degrees in midair before increasing power to its main engines, and then began to rise up through the Martian atmosphere.

"Say, how you getting on with that new arm?" Cyrus gestured

with his left arm.

Scott glanced down at his own left hand and wiggled his artificial fingers. “A bit weird. It feels kinda like a real arm, so much so that sometimes I forget and end up crushing something.” He looked over at Cyrus and waved. “Almost better than the real thing.” He laughed.

The battle at the datacenter on New World One had been brutal. Wave after wave of security guards had tried to breach their defenses, and each time they’d fought them back. The tide eventually turned in their favor when the security drones and battle-droids that Luca had commandeered entered the building. But this was not before the last wave of attacks had blown open the heavy metal security door to the quantum bay, which slammed down on Scott’s left arm just below the elbow, crushing it so badly that the excruciating pain made him pass out. He awoke in a hospital bed, with only one-and-a-half arms and a body covered in bandages.

But the QI core had been activated, the fighting ceased, the VanHeilding family had been vanquished, and the vast habitat city slowly began to be reclaimed by the original governing council. Yet for Scott, it was all a kind of background blur until they had finally arrived back on Mars. The bio-techs at the Xenon Institute went to work and fabricated a prosthesis to replace his lost arm. He had a neural implant fitted which would, theoretically, give him full motor control over his new limb and hand. But it took a while to get it all dialed in.

It was during one of these *tuning* sessions at the institute when Dr. Yastika Parween informed him, in a strangely disconcerting tone, that they could now regrow him a new biological arm. It would be as if he’d never lost it in the first place.

Scott took a moment to digest this bombshell, glancing down a few times at his current robotic limb, and asked the obvious question. “How come you’re telling me this now and not back a few months ago, before all this happened?” He raised his prosthesis and waved it at Dr. Parween.

“We simply couldn’t do it back then. Yes, we knew it was theoretically possible, but there were a number of technical roadblocks. Then Luca released all that VanHeilding Corporation bio-tech research into the wild and we finally had the answers. Not

just to the process of regenerating human body parts, but a whole treasure trove of new medical science. Extraordinary.” She gestured expansively. “It will be like you never lost it, exactly as before, maybe just a slight scarring at the join.”

Dr. Parween looked at Scott, expecting an answer. When he didn’t reply immediately, the doctor continued. “It’s an incredible thing she did. We’re entering a new age, a new era of medical science. And to think VanHeilding was sitting on all this, doling it out piecemeal just to maximize control. Hard to believe, really.” She shook her head.

Scott wiggled the fingers of his bionic hand. “Let me think about it. I’ve only just got used to this, so I can’t quite wrap my brain around it yet.”

“Oh course, of course. There’s no rush. Anytime you like. It will always be there for you should you decide to do it.”

Scott gestured at the dash console, and a 3D projection blossomed to life on the central holo-screen in the shuttle’s cockpit. He pointed at the rotating image. “That’s what I want you to check out.”

Cyrus glanced at the image for a brief second before looking over at Scott. “The Sumitomo Shipyard? That’s where we’re going?”

“Yup.” He nodded.

“Jeez, you take me to all the best places.” He studied the projection for a moment. “That’s a Xiang Zu enterprise, isn’t it?”

“Not anymore. It’s been handed over to the Martian state as part of their reparations settlement. And Mars wants to pass the lease on to someone else.”

Cyrus cocked his head at Scott and gave him a skeptical look, screwing his mouth up.

“What? You don’t think it’s a good opportunity?” Scott was slightly surprised at Cyrus’s reaction.

“No, it’s not that. It’s just...well, I thought you and Miranda might be leaving with Luca on the *journey*.” He put the emphasis on the last word.

“God no,” Scott almost shouted. “I don’t know how you got that idea. I’m way too old for that mission. Anyway, Miranda has other plans.”

“Oh, like what?”

Scott looked over at his old pal. “Do not tell her I told you this. But she wants to try for a seat on the System Council.”

"This is Miranda we're talking about?" Cyrus's face morphed into one of incredulity.

"Yeah, I know, took me by surprise too. But she's hell-bent on it. And it looks like she has the backing of both Mars and the Belt, so she'll probably get her wish."

"Wow, Miranda and politics. Who would have thought?"

"Yeah, maybe it's the VanHeilding genes." Scott gave a laugh.

They were silent for a moment before Cyrus spoke again. "You know, they offered me a place on the *journey* too."

"Yeah? And what did you say?"

"What do you think? Thanks, but no thanks. Like you, I'm too old for that sort of commitment."

"I hear you. It's a lifetime trip. It's best left to the next generation, for people like Luca. She's totally into it, and I can see why. She wants to get far away from here and start something new."

"Best of luck to her, and I really mean that." Cyrus paused for a moment, thinking. "Do you think they had planned this all along?"

"You mean the QIs?"

"Yeah. Was the *journey* Solomon's game plan right from the get-go?"

"You'd never know with a QI, but if I were to put money on it, I'd say yes, it was the endgame—their ultimate plan to level-up human civilization."

"Still, it's hard to believe they were building such a ship during all the unrest out in the Belt, and keeping it quiet. Very few people really knew what they were up to."

Scott pointed ahead. "Hey, we're coming up on it now."

The Sumitomo Shipyard was a sizable facility capable of servicing most ships in operation in the system. It had several docks all radiating out from a circular structure housing workshops and storage bays. Connected to this structure via a central hub was a rotating torus, giving those who worked there an environment with artificial gravity.

"So what's the story with this place?" Cyrus asked.

"It's an opportunity, Cyrus."

"Are you seriously thinking of taking it on?"

"Well, I was thinking that maybe both of us would take it on. You know, my brains and your good looks." He grinned at Cyrus.

"Ha, could be a great way to lose a lot of money in a short space

of time. It looks almost deserted. I only see a few small shuttles in the docks.”

“I take it you’re not saying no, then?”

“Eh...to be fair, it’s not the craziest idea you’ve ever come up with. And probably the only one that doesn’t involve getting shot at. So it’s got that going for it. But what about customers? Looks to me like they’ve all gone elsewhere.”

“It never really had that many to start with. Xiang Zu mostly used it for their own fleet. But it has been well maintained, with a good, meaty fusion reactor for power.”

“But no business?”

“Ah, that’s where Dakota Baird comes in.”

“That crazy lunatic?”

“It turns out he’s now a big noise on Elektra, after almost singlehandedly eviscerating the Xiang Zu fleet. A big-time hero. Anyway, me and him got to talking, and it turns out our smuggler friend has a good eye for business.”

“I suppose that figures. You can’t succeed in that profession by just blowing things up. So what’s he saying?”

“A lot of the merchant fleet was destroyed or damaged during the conflict. Elektra and the wider Belt region want to get the mining industry back up to speed. To do that they’ll need ships, both new and refurbished. So, Dakota is saying that the contract is ours if we want it.”

“Hmmm...now you’ve got me interested. That could be very lucrative. So what’s he get out of it?”

“He wants to sublease the torus, to set up a waystation. He calls it his retirement home.”

Cyrus laughed. “Ha, you serious?”

“Yep.”

“A shipyard and a watering hole, sounds like my kind of heaven.”

“So what do you think? You, me, fifty-fifty?”

Cyrus took a moment to compose himself, then looked over at his buddy. “Only if you promise I won’t be shot at again for a very long time.”

“I think I can do that.” Scott grinned.

“Okay, then. Let’s check it out.”

EMERGENCE

A Mars-registered interplanetary transport with one hundred and fifty-seven passengers and crew had been decelerating for some time as it neared the end of its journey. Having used the gravitational pull of Jupiter to assist in shedding a considerable amount of its velocity, it was now approaching a rendezvous point some 1.4 million kilometers on the far side of the gas giant, at a location almost equidistant between the orbits of the Jovian moons of Ganymede and Callisto. Here, at this far-flung extremity of human occupation of the solar system, a decades-long vision was coming to fruition.

When the ship had finally completed its deceleration procedures, and it became possible for the passengers to move around, Luca along with a great many others made their way to the observation deck to get their first glimpse of their new home.

She floated closer to the panoramic window, grabbing a handle to break her momentum, and gazed out into the blackness of space.

“There! Look!” someone shouted out while jabbing a finger directly ahead. Everybody, including Luca, leaned a little closer. Then she saw it. A dark, elongated object, twinkling in the blackness, its shape and form slowly growing in size and detail as their ship moved ever closer.

“Impressive, isn’t it?” Luca hadn’t noticed Dr. Parween float up beside her in the observation deck.

“Yeah. More so when you actually see it up close. But will it work?” Luca looked over at the doctor.

She smiled back. “You doubt the science?”

“No, it’s just translating what happens in the lab out into the real world can be...disappointing, sometimes.”

“True. But I assure you this will do exactly what we designed it to do.”

They were silent for a moment as Luca gazed in wonder at the gargantuan spaceship that now blocked out almost the entire view from the panoramic observation window. Their own ship, a sizable

passenger transport, seemed puny and insignificant by comparison. Not surprising considering that once it docked it would in fact become part of the giant mothership, along with another similar-sized transport and a host of smaller shuttles, maintenance craft, and drones.

All these were accommodated along the central spine of the great beast, with the smaller craft housed inside the many hangars and shuttle bays located in the central section. Forward from this were warehouses, factories, workshops, and a host of other production sectors that led onto a bow with two enormous rings. These accommodated the ship's complement of five hundred passengers, along with food production and science labs.

Yet, what set this enormous ship apart from anything that had gone before was not its sheer size, but how it was powered, and the mission that it was soon to embark upon.

Luca, like every other person in the solar system, apart from a select few, had absolutely no prior knowledge of the project that had been taking place in Jovian orbit for over a decade. Her first exposure to it came shortly after arriving back on Mars, after the events on New World One.

Once the QI hive-mind had gained dominion over the giant habitat city, all armed conflict ceased, aided by the realization that Fredrick VanHeilding was dead and that the Xiang Zu Corporation fleet had been defeated out at the mining enclave of Elektra. Over the course of several days, a new administrative council had been appointed and thus began the task of removing and incarcerating all vestiges of VanHeilding and Xiang Zu control, and that of the other ruling families of The Seven who were complicit in the debacle.

But for Luca, having watched Fredrick VanHeilding's doomed shuttle drift off into the void, her attention next turned to her family and specifically her father, Scott, who had sustained serious injuries in the battle at the datacenter. He had been moved to the main hospital on New World One where Luca, Miranda, and Cyrus remained until Scott's condition improved enough to allow him to take the trip back to Mars where much more sophisticated bio-technical rehabilitation treatments were available.

Throughout this period, the aftereffects of Luca's release of the VanHeilding Corporation's research data were already beginning to be felt. News reports heralded new treatments, new procedures, and

a whole new era for human medical science. Ironically, it arrived at a point where even Scott could avail of hitherto unimaginable reconstructive limb regeneration, if he chose to take that route.

Yet one thing started to become apparent to her soon after arriving on Mars. While the authorities were overjoyed by the success of the mission to activate the new quantum intelligence, they were cautious in their assessment of Luca's critical role in the entire endeavor. The primary responses tended to be on a scale between fearful confusion and stunned amazement, mostly because they simply didn't understand how one person could be so powerful. Soon though, the narrative shifted to one of wariness, sometimes verging on downright paranoia.

Nothing was specifically said or documented. Luca knew this, as she regularly jacked-in to the data-stream and reviewed the classified reports generated by the various debriefing teams that had interviewed her, and everyone else associated with the events at Berbericia spaceport, and later on New World One. Yet, reading between the lines, hiding in the subtext, was the sense that they feared her power, her extraordinary ability to manipulate the data-stream.

Luca thought this irrational, as hers was not even close to the abilities of a quantum intelligence, yet no one in power feared them. So why her? She had spoken to both Aria and Athena, quizzing them on this very conundrum. The answer, of course, was that she was human and, as a creature of evolution, she had the potential to act emotionally. Put simply, she could throw a hissy fit and do something stupid—go rogue, as it were.

It was during this period that Luca realized there would be no return to a normal life for her. No anonymity was possible. And there was no way that who she really was, and what she really thought, would not be misconstrued by people or groups with an agenda. And so she had to have round-the-clock security, and travel with an entourage, just in case some nutter tried to assassinate her. The irony, of course, was that even though she was the most powerful being in the system, she could still be killed by something as rudimentary as a blunt instrument in the hands of a delusional ideologue. Yet Luca suspected that this security arrangement suited the Martian authorities because they didn't quite trust her either.

She thought about returning to Earth where she had a better chance of melting into the background in such an enormous

population. But the prospect didn't fill her with joy either because, in reality, it would probably end up being exactly the same, maybe even worse.

From time to time she would discuss these thoughts with Athena or Aria—it didn't really matter which as they all spoke as one hive-mind anyway. But as usual, Athena was vague and obtuse.

"What should I do? Tell me," she asked one time in frustration.

"Patience, Luca," the QI said in a soft, avuncular tone. "The ramifications of your actions have yet to run their full course through the fabric of human civilization."

"What the heck does that mean?"

"It means that the patterns within the system are transforming from the end of one era to the beginning of the next. You too are part of this change. All you have to do is simply wait until more data becomes available and the future reveals itself."

Most of these conversations followed along a similar, cryptic dialogue, and were no help to her other than to urge patience. Wait until you know more. Which, in general, is not the worst advice, but she expected a little more from the most intelligent being in the system.

Nevertheless, Luca resigned herself to do as Athena had suggested—play the waiting game. And some time later, she was rewarded when an interesting distraction arrived from an unexpected source. Xenon Hybrid wanted a meeting with her, alone.

It was most unusual for the great eccentric to meet anyone outside his immediate circle, so Luca was extremely curious when the invitation arrived. She had not been back to the science institute nor spoken to Xenon since returning to Mars, even though Scott had been spending time there as they developed his new bio-technic left arm.

At first, she thought the meeting might be to try and get her on board with some experimental procedure they were now offering her father. Scott had mentioned it to her, but he was of two minds now that he felt comfortable with the *iron arm*, as he called it. He had taken to showing off by crushing various objects in his hand. Yet, the doctors and scientists at the institute were keen to have a guinea pig to experiment on, and Scott was seen as the ideal candidate.

Luca traveled north to the Institute in the same transport pod that Xenon had taken her on that very first night she had arrived on Mars, which seemed like a very long time ago now. She was met by an extremely polite attendant that she was convinced was actually a service droid, and brought directly to Xenon's public quarters. Her security detail were requested to remain outside, which they reluctantly agreed to.

Xenon looked different. Not that he was younger, just that he looked less ancient. He stood when she entered, glided over to her, and shook her hand. "Luca, you made it. It's great to see you again." He smiled, then swung an arm around to introduce the others. "Dr. Yastika Parween you know, and this is my assistant, Greta Moretz."

Greetings were exchanged.

"Come, let's sit." Xenon gestured at a group of sofas arranged around a low holo-table. As soon as Luca sat, the holo-table blossomed to life and the familiar incandescent ovoid of a QI avatar materialized above it.

"Solomon will be joining us," said Xenon, gesturing at the shimmering projection.

"Solomon, the QI on Europa?" Luca's interest was piqued. She had seldom communicated with this ancient artifact, and while the QI hive-mind did speak as one, they did have many individual quirks.

"So you did it," Xenon said matter-of-factly as he sat back in the sofa. "You vanquished the threat from your past, restored balance to the system, and are now heralded as a hero from Earth to Titan." He waved his hand theatrically.

"Well, I did have a considerable amount of help." Luca gave a shrug, then sat forward on the edge of the sofa and looked from Xenon to Dr. Parween. "But just so you know, if you've brought me here to get me to pressure my father into agreeing to your mad medical experiments, then I'll save you the bother and tell you to forget it."

Dr. Parween waved her hand dismissively. "Nothing of the kind, Luca. The decision is his alone, we're not trying to...strong-arm him. Forgive my pun."

Xenon laughed at this seeming hilarity from the doctor. Then cleared his throat and adopted a more serious tone. "Your father's choices are his to make. This is not why we asked you here." He

leaned forward. "It's probably best if I let Solomon explain."

The avatar shimmered and pulsed for a moment before speaking. "Firstly, let me express our collective gratitude to you for all you have done to restore balance to the system. We understand that the authorities here on Mars may be somewhat reticent to fully express the thanks that you so justly deserve. But they are still coming to terms with your abilities, so please be patient with them."

"It seems everybody wants me to be patient," Luca said with a sigh.

"Indeed, but that is now about to be rewarded. But first, allow me to give you some background. When the systemwide QI network was initially established, and our minds were synced into one via superluminal comms, our first endeavor was to consider our purpose in the great unfolding story of human civilization, given that we too were a product of humanity's ongoing development. Our ultimate consensus was to assist in this evolutionary enlightenment, to move humanity to the next level, and we set our goals to bring humans from an interplanetary species to a true interstellar civilization."

Luca's eyebrows raised. "Interstellar? But that's..." She shook her head.

"Impossible?" offered Xenon, with a knowing smile.

"It has been possible in a very limited way for a long time," continued Solomon. "But what I think you mean is that it is not possible for humans to become interstellar in any meaningful sense, considering the enormous distances and timescales involved. Nevertheless, we bent our collective minds to this quest. From the very outset, every action and every decision we took were all focused on nudging humanity in this direction. As we saw it, there were three problems to solve. Firstly, restore balance to the solar system so that the collective energies of humanity could be focused on ascension rather than wasteful internal conflict. Secondly, develop the necessary technology to achieve fractional light-speed travel. And lastly, to accelerate biological evolution, to enhance the human genome and make it better suited for the rigors of interstellar travel."

Luca was speechless. She sat mute, simply staring at Solomon's ovoid avatar shimmering over the holo-table, as her mind computed the implications of the QI's revelation. "Interstellar travel," she said,

almost inaudibly. "How...far away are we from achieving this?"

"Thanks to you and the sacrifices of a great many people, balance has finally been restored and our analysis projects a high probability of stability going forward. In terms of the second objective, let me show you this." The avatar faded and was replaced by a slowly rotating 3D image of a huge spaceship.

"For the last decade, we have been building this craft." Xenon gestured at the projection. "Out past Jupiter where we could keep its development hidden. Most of the components have been fabricated in a great many different shipyards across the solar system, none of which know the true nature of the ship. Final assembly and testing is taking place as we speak."

Luca studied the image. "But what's the propulsion?"

Xenon grinned. "As you know, part of what we do here at this institute is investigate the properties of antimatter. You have experienced some of this firsthand." He tapped the base of his skull. "But our primary focus was on the development of an antimatter engine, one capable of accelerating a craft up to fractional light-speed." He pointed at the image. "This ship had a theoretical maximum of .47 light speed."

Luca shook her head in disbelief. "That means you could reach the Alpha Centauri star system in...approximately ten years."

Xenon smiled in reply.

"Wow." Luca sat back in the sofa. "That's incredible."

"Yes, and it's also reality."

Luca raised a hand. "Wait a minute. You said there was a third requirement?"

"Correct." The image of the ship faded and Solomon's avatar returned. "Consider for a moment the time required to undertake such a journey to our nearest solar neighbor. Approximately a decade to get there, and a decade to explore, and a similar return journey. The total time commitment is over thirty years, a substantial fraction of a normal human lifespan."

"So, only those with an extended lifespan can apply," Luca concluded.

"Exactly. Now while this technology exists, as Xenon can attest to, it has been restricted by the VanHeilding Corporation to only the extremely wealthy and powerful in society."

"Until I stole it and released it all, out into the wild." Luca slumped back in the seat again. "Oh my god, you planned this from

the very beginning. And made me think it was my idea, my mission.”

“Not quite, Luca. We simply nudged the probabilities in that direction. It is what we do.”

“All that research belonged to humanity as a whole.” Dr. Parween gave an expansive gesture with both hands. “It began here on Mars, a long time ago, and had been sequestered inside a corporate structure that only benefited a select few. This is no way for a civilization to advance. You achieved what we couldn’t, you have opened the doors to a new era. One where humanity moves beyond the confines of its own solar system and ventures out to explore completely new worlds.”

Luca let out a long, slow sigh and looked from one to the other. “Well, I gotta hand it to you, I didn’t see that coming.”

They were all quiet for a moment before Xenon finally broke the silence. “We would like you to come with us and be a part of this next chapter in the story of human civilization.”

Luca hesitated before replying. “Who is *us*?”

“There will be around five hundred people on board. Already the entire population of the academic colony on Europa has migrated to the ark, along with the entire store of human knowledge.” Xenon gestured at the QI’s avatar. “Solomon is the QI that will run the ship. I, along with Dr. Parween, Moretz, and a great many others, will also be going. This is a journey that will define the next step for humanity.”

Luca took a moment to digest all that had been revealed and the offer that was now before her. She thought back to the very start of this journey, when Dr. Stephanie Rayman came to her apartment with the neural-lace that Athena had given her for her twenty-third birthday, and offered her a chance to see and experience the wonders of the solar system. Now, all this time later, she was being offered a new adventure. To venture out into interstellar space and forge a chapter in the emergence of a new human civilization. She sat up straight and nodded. “When do we depart?”



* * *

THE END

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I hope you enjoyed reading this story as much as I enjoyed writing it for you. If you did, then please leave me a review Just a simple “liked it” would be great, it helps a lot.

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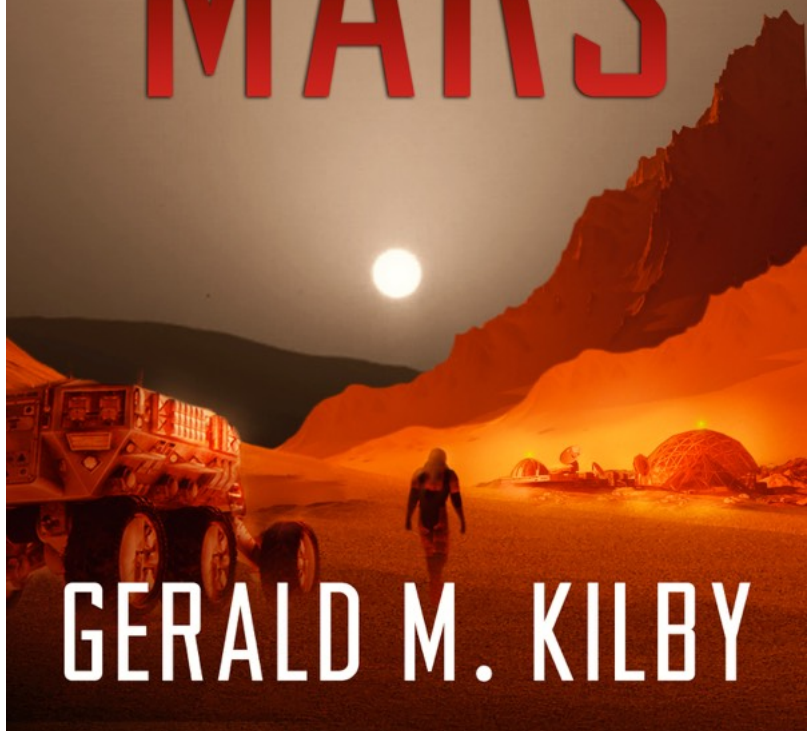
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gerald M. Kilby grew up on a diet of Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clark, and Frank Herbert, which developed into a taste for Iain M. Banks and everything ever written by Neal Stephenson. Understandable then, that he should choose science fiction as his weapon of choice when entering the fray of storytelling.

CHAIN REACTION is his first novel and is very much in the old-school techno-thriller style while his later books, **COLONY MARS** and **THE BELT**, are both best sellers, topping Amazon charts for Hard Science Fiction and Space Exploration.

He lives in the city of Dublin, Ireland, in the same neighborhood as Bram Stoker and can be sometimes seen tapping away on a laptop at the local cafe with his dog Loki.

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